

GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL
Uttarpara Jaikrishna Public Library

Accn. No. 4412.....

Date 24.9.'74.....

Call

Shelf List No. 823.....

SHE

A BRAVE GIRL;

OR,

HOW RUTH WON HER HERITAGE.

BY MRS. GEORGIE SHELTON,

*Author of "Sister Angela," "That Dowdy of a Girl," "The Masked Bridal,"
"Grazia's Mistake," &c., &c.*

LONDON: JAMES HENDERSON,
RED LION HOUSE, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

LONDON :

JAMES BENDERSON, RED LION HOUSE, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

Copyright, 1895.

A BRAVE GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

Ruth Reynolds is the name of our heroine. Ruth's mother had died about a year before the opening of the story. Her father, Mr. Reynolds, had been failing for months, and as he drew near his end, he was appalled by the thought that he would have to leave his sensitive, beautiful daughter alone and penniless in the world, his own and his wife's long illness having absorbed what little he had been able to save from his limited income, from year to year, and thus Ruth would be obliged to earn her own living.

"My poor darling," he exclaimed, one day, while giving her some instructions and advice, "I have absolutely nothing to leave you as an heirloom, save my worn-out books—which would be but cumbersome property, and had better be made over to our small public library—and that old cane, which once belonged to your mother's grandfather."

As he spoke Mr. Reynolds glanced, with a half-patetic, half-amused smile, at the clumsy, ancient-looking relic that rested upon two brass hooks above the mantel-shelf.

"My mother's grandfather!" Ruth repeated, as her glance followed his. "I thought it belonged to her father."

"Yes," gravely returned Mr. Reynolds, "I know that is what you have always been told; but it is supposed to have been handed down from several generations before him, although there was a great obstacle in the way of your grandfather Allenwood claiming kinship with them."

"How so?" questioned Ruth, a look of surprise gleaming in her great, innocent eyes.

Mr. Reynolds did not reply for a mo-

ment; he appeared to be mentally debating some momentous question.

At last he said, a slight flush rising to his pale cheek:

"There is a vein of romance running through the history of your mother's ancestors, my dear, but as there is something of dishonour also involved in it, we have always been averse to referring to it; we even agreed, between ourselves, never to reveal the fact to you. And yet, since I came to realize that I must soon leave you all alone, I have been strangely impressed that it might be my duty to disclose to you something of the genealogy of the family."

"A romance!" exclaimed Ruth, catching eagerly at the word. "Oh, papa, can it be possible that anything of a romantic nature could be associated with any one existing among these quiet, sombre green hills?"

"Do not anticipate too much, my darling," was the sad rejoinder, "for the story has anything but a pleasant flavour; indeed, it is hardly suitable for your ears. Still, something impels me to tell it."

Mr. Reynolds opened a drawer in his desk as he spoke, and taking out a small book, opened it, thus revealing its pages closely written over, and read the following account:

"Amos Rothwick was the eldest son of Sir Roger Rothwick—in whose veins flowed some of England's best blood—of Rothwick Castle, Derbyshire. He was said to be a wild, dissolute fellow in his youth, and a world-wide rover. Upon the death of his father he was summoned home to take charge of the estate and assume his proper position in the world. A few months later he married, with great pomp and ceremony, a young woman above him in point of

rank, but poor in this world's goods, although she possessed an excessively proud and arrogant nature. One child was born to them, a sturdy boy, who gave promise of being the counterpart of his mother, both in features and disposition. But, soon after his birth, Sir Amos and his haughty wife had a terrible quarrel, which ended in their becoming utterly estranged, although they continued to dwell under the same roof. This quarrel was caused by Lady Rothwick discovering, in some mysterious way, that her husband had formed a romantic attachment before she became his wife; that, during his "wild days," he had lured a beautiful girl—the daughter of one of his father's tenants—into a pretended secret marriage; that a son had been the result of this "*liaison*," as her ladyship termed it, and the mother and son were still being supported out of the Rothwick coffers. Robert Allenwood was the name of this unfortunate boy."

"Oh, papa, not my mother's father!" exclaimed beautiful Ruth Reynolds, her face suddenly crimsoning with mingled shame and dismay.

"Yes, dear; I told you the story had an unpleasant flavour. But in spite of the disagreeable fact, Robert Allenwood grew up a noble boy, inheriting his mother's virtues, without his father's vices. And now we come to the story of the cane," said Mr. Reynolds, referring again to the book.

"Sir Amos continued to care for the child and his mother, notwithstanding his haughty wife's displeasure, although he removed them to a distant shire beyond her reach. He even visited them once or twice a year, and upon one occasion took the Rothwick cane with him. It was surmounted with a finely-carved horse's head, and was given to Robert "to play with," while the gentleman talked with his mother. But when Sir Amos was ready to go, and demanded his cane, the child cried bitterly for his steed. The baronet laughed, and pacified him by telling him he should have it again some time; that he would "will it to him when he died." The boy never forgot the promise, and frequently referred to it, while his

mother never attached the slightest importance to it until one evening, just as she was retiring, there came an imperative knock upon her cottage door. Upon answering it, she found Sir Amos Rothwick's valet outside, and he put into her hands the Rothwick cane and a small package."

"Ah!" suddenly interposed Mr. Reynolds, looking up, "that reminds me that I have another heirloom for you, Ruth; I had forgotten it entirely.

"The man said that his master was dying," he went on, resuming his reading; "that he had sent the cane to the boy, as he had promised, but he must never let it go out of his family; the package was for Mrs. Allenwood. There was a letter also, the servant continued, putting his hand into his pocket for it. It was not there, however, and though he searched faithfully every receptacle on his person, it could not be found. He promised to look for it on his return to the castle, and bring it to her later; but he never returned—the letter never came to light, and the poor woman never knew what message the baronet had sent her from his dying bed. Upon examining the package, she found only a key."

"A key! To what?" Ruth hastily interposed.

"My child, that was a tantalizing mystery then, and it has remained such to this day," replied her father, laying down the book. "Open that drawer again, and you will find the strange legacy in a small box at the back."

The girl obeyed, and a moment later was curiously examining a very peculiarly-shaped key.

It was about three inches long, made of bronze, its thumb-piece ornamented with a thistle above two olive leaves, while the opposite end was shaped like a cross.

"What a strange—what a useless thing for a dying man to bequeath to that poor woman!" the young girl indignantly exclaimed.

"It certainly seems so," Mr. Reynolds replied, "but"—taking up his book again—"it says here that doubtless it was a very significant legacy, which the

missing letter would have explained; but poor Mrs. Allenwood was destined never to be enlightened, and so lived out her sad life, a wronged and heartbroken woman. Robert married early in life a sensible, energetic girl, and went to America to carve out his own future. They settled in Montpelier, where they were wonderfully prosperous for many years, only to lose everything during one of the financial crises that swept over the country.

"Robert Allenwood was a noble, whole-souled man—a man of high mental attainments and unswerving principle. Alice Edgemont was his worthy helpmate; and I, Elizabeth Allenwood Reynolds—the only living child out of five—have made a record of this strange history. My father gave me both the Rothwick cane and key just before he died, exacting a promise that I would never part with them to strangers, but hand them down as heirlooms to my children. "They are nothing but a clumsy stick of wood and a bit of rudely-fashioned iron," he said, "but they are at least a link proving that the Rothwick blood flows in my veins, even though that fact brings a blush of shame to my cheek. Had my mother reared me less conscientiously, I might have been tempted to use them to work out the sentiment embodied in the Rothwick coat-of-arms—a thistle above two olive leaves—which is supposed to indicate that a Rothwick never forgives a wrong until he is avenged." "

"Why, papa, what a strange, strange story!" Ruth exclaimed, with a long-drawn sigh, as her father concluded and wearily laid down his book. "It is a romance indeed; a mystery so profound that there seems not the slightest hope of ever solving it; and yet," she went on, musingly, "if that letter is still in existence and could be found, what wonders it might reveal!"

"Ruth," said her father, more sternly than he had addressed her for years, "put all such nonsense at once and for ever out of your mind. That letter could have revealed nothing but what would have served to confirm the shame that rested upon Robert Allenwood's

mother. It might possibly have told of some provision which Sir Amos Rothwick had made for her and her child; but if so, it is just as well that she never received it. I believe that your grandfather was a better man for owing nothing to that unprincipled baronet for the success which he achieved in life. Keep the cane and key if you like—indeed, I suppose it becomes your duty, since your mother pledged herself to hand them down to future generations—but don't nurse any silly notions regarding them. To me they are utterly valueless, and but unsightly objects as well—excepting that horse's head, which is a fine bit of carving—and such a pledge has seemed nothing but foolishness."

Ruth flushed under her father's reproof; but without replying to it, she arose, went to the mantelshelf, and took down the cane.

It was indeed but "a clumsy piece of wood," much marred and battered from long usage.

It had an ancient and foreign look, but the only attractive point it possessed was the head, which was really a masterpiece of carved ebony inserted in and firmly riveted to the top of the cane.

"I wonder how old it is," the girl thoughtfully remarked. "I wonder how many titled gentlemen have carried it, and why. Sir Amos Rothwick allowed it to go out of his family"—this last with a scarlet spot on either cheek and a startled gleam in her great blue eyes.

"My dear child, why will you puzzle your brain over anything so useless? It is not worth your while; do not make me regret that I have told you the story," her father pleaded. "And now," he added, feebly rising, "as I am very weary, I will lie down and rest a while."

He passed into the next room, closing the door, leaving Ruth absorbed in thought over her peculiar heirlooms.

She laid down the cane and took up the key.

"A Rothwick never forgives a wrong until it is avenged," she repeated, touching the olive leaves and thistle with the rosy tips of her taper fingers. "Humph! I wonder if that wrong will

ever be 'avenged' or righted. I am a Rothwick—though four times removed," she added, with a little amused laugh. "I wonder if the Rothwick blood has become so adulterated that none of the family traits are inherited by me!"

She stood looking down upon the relic in her hands for a moment or two, a very thoughtful look on her young face.

"A key is made to unlock something," she said, at length. "I have the key, but where is the lock to which it belongs? and what is the secret it guards? I am sure that Sir Amos Rothwick had some vital purpose in view when he sent these things to Robert Allenwood's mother by a special messenger from a dying bed."

She started suddenly, then shivered as if some cold chill had struck her.

"How queer!" she murmured, glancing around the room half fearfully, "but something seemed to tell me just then that some time I shall find that lock—that some time I shall learn that secret!"

Mr. Reynolds had no relatives, scarcely a friend in all the world outside his humble parish, to whom he could apply in his daughter's behalf; the only feasible plan he could think of was to write to a lady in New York, who had once professed herself a devoted friend to Mrs. Reynolds, and ask her to put Ruth in the way of doing something for her own support.

Acting upon this thought, he wrote an appealing letter to her, but up to within a fortnight of his death no reply had come, and he was at that time in a distressing state of suspense regarding the future of his child.

He tried to arrange everything so that Ruth would have no care after he was gone.

Three weeks later, her father, having been laid in the village churchyard beside his wife, poor, homeless, almost friendless, but dangerously beautiful Ruth Reynolds, having received the long-looked-for letter from her mother's former "friend," bade farewell to her quiet home among the Green Mountains and went out into the world to earn her own living and to meet her fate.

CHAPTER II.

AN INTERESTING CHAPTER.

"I assure you, sir, that I purchased my ticket before I came aboard the boat; but during the night my purse, containing my ticket and all my money, was stolen from me."

"Bah! miss; that is an old, worn-out dodge, and I've had it tried on me too many times not to know what it means. I must have your ticket or you cannot leave the boat."

"But I have told you that it has been stolen."

"Well, you'll have to prove that statement, miss. Where have you been all this time? Why didn't you tell of it before, and go off with the other passengers, instead of waiting until this late hour, then come sneaking up in such a sly way, trying to elude an explanation?"

"I did not try to elude an explanation, sir; and the reason I am so late in going off the boat is because I have spent every moment, since discovering my loss, trying to find my purse. I knew my fare was paid, and felt I had a right to go ashore."

The above conversation had occurred on the lower deck of one of the steamers that ply between Fall River and New York.

It was more than an hour after the arrival of the boat; which had long since been deserted by every one except those employed aboard, and the young girl, who, having stolen timidly up from the ladies' cabin, was about to glide off upon the pier, when she was rudely accosted and detained by one of the inferior officers of the vessel, who demanded her ticket, as above described.

The girl was a little above the medium height, with a trim, graceful figure, and a certain air that at once impressed the beholder that she had been well reared, in spite of the plainness of her attire and certain unmistakable evidences of poverty.

Her face could not be distinctly seen for she wore a thick, blue veil; but the contour and pose of her small head were remarkably pretty, while the wealth of golden hair that crowned it—fine as

glossy as satin—betrayed the fact that she was a blonde of the purest type.

Her manner was nervous and embarrassed—at least, it had been until the officer had charged her with trying to “sneak” off the boat, when her shapely head had lifted itself proudly, and she had replied with an air of dignity and superiority that caused the man to flush and shift uneasily before her.

“Humph!” he ejaculated, “did you tell the stewardess of your loss?”

“I did, and she assisted me in my search.

“Was there much money in your purse?” inquired the man, curiously, while he tried to get a better view of the veiled face before him.

“About five dollars,” faltered the girl, tremulously, “and—it was all the money I had,” she unwisely added.

“Really, miss, it’s a very pathetic story,” sneered the official, “but it won’t go down with me; I tell you it’s been played too often, and I’ll have to detain you for an investigation.”

With an impulsive upward sweep of her small, shabbily-gloved hand, the maiden threw back her heavy veil, thus disclosing a ravishingly beautiful face and a pair of wonderful blue eyes, which, with the indignation that blazed forth from their mystic depths, seemed at that moment to be almost black.

There were traces of recent tears upon her flushed cheeks, which, perhaps, accounted for her face having been covered with the veil, and her sensitive lips were quivering from nervous excitement and anxiety.

“You doubt my word,” she said, haughtily. “I would not tell a lie for the price of a hundred tickets, and, had not my loss rendered me absolutely penniless, I would gladly pay my fare again rather than bandy words with you. Where is your captain? I will appeal to him.”

She was exquisitely lovely in her irritated indignation, and the officer’s face involuntarily relaxed into an expression of bold admiration, while there came into his evil eyes a look that made him instinctively shrink away from him step or two.

Suddenly the man’s manner changed; he became fawning and obsequious, a servile smile curling his sensuous lips.

“Tut tut! pretty one,” he said, insinuatingly. “I didn’t dream that you were such a little firebrand; but”—glancing searchingly round to assure himself that they were still the only persons in that portion of the boat—“never mind about the captain; just give me a kiss from those sweet lips of yours, then we’ll say no more about the ticket, and perhaps I’ll give you a lift on your way besides.”

“Sir!” indignantly began the fair girl, and growing suddenly white with mingled anger and fear.

“Hush! you haughty little empress,” warningly interposed her companion; “such airs will not help your cause; you are in my power, and now I’m going to have that kiss, whether you will or not—then you can call the captain if you want to, and settle that other matter afterwards.”

As he spoke, he rudely laid hold of her shoulder with one hand, and was about to encircle her slight form with his other arm, when, before the frightened girl—who was almost paralyzed with fear—could even cry out for help, a manly figure sprang into view, seized the wretch by the collar from behind, and the next moment he lay sprawling upon the deck, while his half-fainting victim staggered weakly up against a partition for support.

Presently she was conscious that a tall form was bending over her and a kind, pitiful face looking into hers, while a rich, mellow voice murmured reassuringly in her ear:

“Young lady, pray calm yourself; you have nothing more to fear from that coward, who shall answer to his superior officer for the insult he has dared to offer you.”

As the blur which had obscured her vision began to clear away, the girl found herself looking into the handsome, almost ideal, face of a young man, whose splendid physique, grandly-shaped head, and classic features made her think of the pictures that she had seen of the Apollo Belvedere.

A great sigh of relief and thankfulness escaped her white lips, for she knew, instinctively, that she had found a protector who, in spite of her poverty and misfortune, would befriend and respect her because of his reverence for womanhood in whatever sphere of life.

"I congratulate myself," the gentleman continued, "that I was obliged to return to the steamer just at this time, having carelessly left a package in my state-room. How does it happen, if I may be allowed to know, that you have been detained so long aboard the boat? If I am not mistaken, I saw you among the other passengers last evening."

In a few brief sentences the unfortunate maiden told her story, while her companion listened attentively, studying her fair ingenuous face with shrewd, earnest eyes.

By the time she had concluded, her persecutor, who had been partially stunned by his fall, had struggled to his feet, and now approached her companion with a threatening air, a malignant scowl adding to the natural repulsiveness of his coarse face.

"That girl has no ticket, and she can't leave the boat until her fare is paid!" he exclaimed, in blustering tones.

The distinguished-looking stranger wheeled round to face him, towering above him with his six feet of stature and kingly bearing in the most imposing manner.

"Don't presume to utter another word in this lady's presence, unless you wish to repeat the experience of a few moments ago," he sternly commanded. "Ah, here is the captain," he added, as he saw that official coming up the companion-way. "Now we will have this matter arranged without any further trouble."

"What's the meaning of this?" the captain gravely questioned, as he approached the trio, while his quick eye took in at a glance the girl's pale, anxious face, the sullen, chagrined bearing, soiled and disordered appearance of his subordinate, and the menacing attitude of the strange gentleman.

"That girl is a stowaway, sir. She was trying to sneak off the boat, when, as I

stopped her, this young fellow interfered and knocked me down," excitedly interposed the under officer, although he instinctively shrank back a step as he met the blazing glance which the "fellow" turned upon him.

"Yes, I knocked him down," calmly returned the gentleman, in response to the look of inquiry which the captain bent upon him; "but it was because he insulted the lady—not because I had any wish to interfere with the performance of his duty."

Then he proceeded to give a brief account of what he had seen and heard, while his listener's face grew black with wrath at the disgraceful disclosure.

He turned, at the close of the recital, to the cinging, sullen villain, who was slyly edging his way towards the companion-way, and said, in a voice of thunder:

"Knave, you are discharged! Get you gone, and never dare show yourself on this vessel again;" and, casting looks of hatred upon the two who witnessed his dismissal, the wretch shrank out of sight.

"And so you think your purse was stolen?" the captain continued, turning to the young girl and speaking with great kindness.

"I do not know how else to account for its loss," she replied, "for I put it carefully under my pillow just before I retired."

"Have you any luggage?"

"Only this, and a small trunk containing what clothing I have," she answered, as she held out a worn hand-satchel, which she opened, revealing some clean handkerchiefs and a few modest toilet articles.

Just at this moment a coloured woman came running up from the cabin.

"Oh, captain!" she breathlessly exclaimed, upon seeing him, although she could not see the young girl, who was standing behind his portly form, "A poor little miss lost her purse last night, and had to go off the boat this morning without a cent of money—Why! here she is now!" she interposed, as the object of her sympathy started forward with a low, glad cry. "I've found it, honey," the good-natured stewardess went on, as she

triumphantly held out a cheap little pocket-book. "It must have slipped down among the folds of the curtains and got kicked under the lower berth, where I came across it while sweeping."

"Oh, thank you! thank you! I am so glad!" almost sobbed the maiden, as she eagerly grasped her lost treasure.

With trembling but eager fingers she opened it and found the much-needed ticket inside.

"Now I can prove that my fare was paid, and my story true," she said, with a charming little air of triumph, as she passed the required bit of pasteboard to the captain, a smile like a gleam of sunshine lighting up her beautiful eyes and chasing the clouds from her lovely face.

"And is your money also safe?" he kindly inquired.

"Yes, sir," she responded, but flushing slightly, as, with a single glance, she estimated the meagre amount.

"I am very glad," said the officer, with a friendly accent, "but I regret exceedingly that you should have met with such an annoying experience on a vessel under my command. Is there anything I can do to assist you further? If so, I am at your service." •

"Thank you, no; I believe I can do very well, now that I have my money," she began; when her champion interposed, with a courteous bow:

"I understood you to say that you have a trunk; pray allow me to find it for you, and see you safely in a carriage to take you to your destination."

"You are very kind, but I—I think I shall not need a carriage," she faltered, blushing; "but I will be obliged to you if you will tell me the easiest way to reach this address," she concluded, taking a scrap of paper from her purse to give him.

The captain intercepted it.

"I will attend to the young lady, sir," he quietly observed; "but I thank you heartily on her behalf and my own also, for your timely assistance and protection."

A slight smile of amusement curled the lips of the handsome stranger at this indirect dismissal; but he understood and appreciated the officer's determination not to trust that beautiful young

girl to any one, however responsible he might appear, after what had occurred.

"I am very glad to leave her in such good hands," he courteously replied; then, lifting his hat in a respectful salutation to his fair charge, and responding to her grateful glance with a luminous smile, he went his way.

The captain conducted his companion to the wharf, where he soon found her trunk, then secured a carriage, and put her into it.

"Young lady," he remarked, with a friendly smile, as he closed the door of the vehicle, "I know this man, and he will take you safely to your destination, so do not give yourself any uneasiness if the ride seems long to you. Your fare is paid, too—that much is due you for the delay and annoyance to which you have been subjected. Good morning."

He touched his cap, smiled cheerily into her face, signalled the driver to move on, and the next moment the grateful girl was on her way up town.

Just as she rolled off the pier, she glanced out of the window on her right, and caught a glimpse of the handsome stranger who had so opportunely come to her rescue.

His eyes were upon her, and, as she met his glance, he raised his hat again. She flushed with pleasure, her red lips parted in a charming smile as she nodded in response to his salute.

The next moment she had passed him.

"How kind—how grand he was!" she murmured, the flush still on her cheeks. "I wonder if I shall ever see him again. I wish I could learn his name."

The young man himself was indulging in a similar soliloquy.

"She is the prettiest little bit of humanity I have ever seen," he mused. "She has spirit, too, in spite of her poverty-stricken appearance. I wonder who she is!"

CHAPTER III.

AN ARDENT LOVER WINS HIS POINT.

O, rank is good, and gold is fair,

And high and low mate ill;

But love has never known a law

Beyond its own sweet will.

We already know what befell our fair

heroine upon her arrival in New York, and how she escaped falling a victim to a human vulture, just as she was leaving the steamer.

After the interposition of the captain, all went well with her, and, in less than an hour, she was set down at the door of a beautiful residence in West Thirty-sixth-street, the silver plate upon which bore the name of Win. Winslow.

Several years previous Mr. and Mrs. Winslow had both been members of Mr. Reynolds' church, and, at that time, had professed a strong friendship for their cultivated pastor and his gentle wife, but a turn in fortune's wheel had made them suddenly rich, and they had removed to New York, where they were not long in becoming launched upon the restless sea of fashionable life.

For a while the two ladies had kept up their intimacy by correspondence; but this was finally interrupted when the Winslows went to Europe. Before their return, Mrs. Reynolds sickened and died; and when her friend learned the fact, she wrote a letter of condolence to the bereaved husband, telling him that if there was anything she could do for him or his, not to fail to call upon her at any time.

Taking her at her word, the clergyman, when he found he must soon leave his child alone in the world, begged her to have a care for his one darling, and to exert herself in putting the orphan in the way of doing something for her own support.

The lady's conscience would not allow her to ignore this pathetic appeal, although she was somewhat dismayed at having had her letter interpreted so literally, so she had sent a reply only a few days before Mr. Reynolds had breathed his last, telling him to send Ruth to her, and she would do the best she could for her.

She received the fair girl kindly, but with a thus-far-and-no-farther air which at once nipped in the bud whatever hope Ruth may have cherished that she was going to find a friend to love her for her mother's sake, if not for her own.

Almost immediately upon her arrival

Mrs. Winslow informed her that, having learned from her father that she could sew very nicely, she had secured a place for her, as seamstress, in the family of a friend who lived in the country.

Accordingly, a few days later found the lonely girl pleasantly housed in a beautiful residence on the Hudson, a few miles from Albany, where she was to serve, in the capacity of waiting-maid and seamstress, another fashionable woman, Mrs. Anthony Plympton by name.

* * * * *

"My blue-eyed darling, my modest little forget-me-not, tell me that you love me—promise me that you will be my wife. You know that I worship you—that I began to love you from the moment of my return, and to realize that my life will only be complete with you for my constant companion."

"But, Mr. Plympton"—

"Nay, sweet, be not so formal—call me Ralph; but first assure me that your heart responds to mine—tell me that you love me."

"I—I am not quite sure"—

"Oh! but you do not dislike me? I am not uncongenial to you?"

"Oh, no, indeed; next to my father and mother, I believe I never cared so much for anyone"—

"Ah! Ruth, darling, sweetheart! then I shall claim you as my own! You are mine—mine! and I will soon remove all doubt from your mind regarding your love for me."

The above conversation occurred, one lovely summer evening, in a small arbour that had been erected in the grounds of Hazelwood Heights—the elegant residence of Mr. Anthony Plympton—and commanded a fine view of the beautiful Hudson River, a few miles below Albany.

Two years had passed since the opening of our story and the instalment of our heroine, pretty Ruth Reynolds, in the service of Mrs. Anthony Plympton.

She had lived a quiet, peaceful—indeed, almost a happy life during this time, and had found Mrs. Plympton to be, on the whole, a considerate woman to work for; while, being of a naturally

amiable disposition herself, everything had seemed to run smoothly from the day when she had assumed her duties as waiting-maid and seamstress.

Without doubt this delightful state of things was owing, in a great measure, to the fact that the lady of the mansion soon realized that she had secured no ordinary girl to serve her in this capacity, and so deemed it expedient to make her life as pleasant as was consistent with her position.

Ruth was marvellously expert with her needle. She possessed exquisite taste, besides no small amount of inventive genius, while she always appeared so interested in her work as to make it seem a pleasure rather than a task.

Meantime she had developed greatly; she had grown taller, and was even expanding into almost dazzling beauty.

Her responsibilities had a tendency to make her more mature; she had thus lost much of the timid, childish manner that had characterized her before leaving home, and in its place there had fallen upon her a pretty air of dignity and self-reliance that contributed much to her other charms.

In temperament she was naturally cheerful; and when, as was often the case, her clear, girlish, happy laugh rang through the house, or she carolled sweet songs over her work, Mrs. Plympton would experience a jealous pang in her maternal bosom that a girl so fair should have been torn to a woman in a humble sphere in life.

"Oh!" she sighed, many and many a time, "why could not I have had a daughter like her?"

And yet there soon came a day when she scornfully repudiated her as such!

And why?

Not because she was not worthy, beautiful, or intelligent—for Ruth had been a thorough student under her cultured father—but because she was "poor" and a girl of "no position!"

At the end of two years the idolized son and heir of the house—Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton—returned from a long sojourn abroad, where he had been studying a little, travel-

ling a good deal, and having a good time generally.

From the hour that he recrossed the threshold of his home and met her, he became hopelessly infatuated with his mother's beautiful seamstress.

He was shrewd and worldly—wise enough, however, not to betray the state of his feelings in the presence of his parents; but, as Mrs. Plympton's many engagements kept her from home a good deal, and his father was absorbedly immersed in business, it was an easy matter to conceal his *penchant* for Ruth, and to manage to spend much of his time in her charming society. Mr. Anthony Plympton was "the great man" of the region where he resided. He had made his money in various ways—such as buying promising patents from struggling inventors for a mere trifle, manipulating stocks, and advancing money at the usurious rates of from one to three per cent. per month.

He had gone up like the proverbial rocket, but with no likelihood of coming down like the stick also mentioned in the familiar adage.

Therefore it will surprise no one to learn that he was a purse-proud, would-be aristocrat, having a great deal to say about "the Plympton family," "the Plympton estates," and "the Plympton prosperity" generally, while it also goes without saying that, ever since the birth of his son, he had been building famous castles in the air for the scion of "the Plympton house" and the pride of "the Plympton heart."

But how true it is that

The best-laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley!

And the said scion and pride of Hazlewood Heights proceeded at once, after returning to the paternal mansion, to prove that much quoted proposition of the shrewd old Scottish poet.

Does the reader marvel at the blindness of the fond parents!

Ah! but Cupid is a tricky god!

Love keeps its revels where there are but twain.

And since the young man had conducted himself with the utmost discre-

tion, assuming a becoming reserve and indifference whenever he chanced to meet the pretty seamstress in the presence of his parents, they fondly imagined that his pride was only equalled by their own, and he would never stoop to admire or be guilty of undue familiarity with one so far beneath him in social position.

But to return to that harbour overlooking the broad Hudson.

Mr. and Mrs. Plympton had gone to Saratoga for a few days, to meet some friends from the West, thus giving the young lover a most propitious opportunity to pursue his wooing, and which he proceeded to improve most industriously, as we have already seen.

It was a warm, lovely afternoon early in September, and Ruth, weary of remaining indoors, had taken her work and strolled out to the pretty Gothic summer house that had been built on an elevated point of land that commanded a view of the river for many miles.

She was clad in a pretty blue-and-white lawn dress, a knot of blue ribbon daintily adjusted in the ruffle at one side of her neck, and another on each sleeve at the wrist. Her beautiful hair was becomingly arranged, and in her crisp, fresh costume, with "a light that was never on sea or land" illuminating her lovely face and gleaming in her wonderful eyes, with a happy smile curving her red lips, just enough to reveal the rows of white, even teeth between them, not to mention the tiny kid-slipped feet that peeped from beneath her immaculate skirts, she was an object to charm the heart of any beauty-loving man directly out of his keeping.

And so Ralph Plympton found her; he always found her as soon as the coast was clear; and before a half-hour had passed he had made the declaration we have recorded.

The attraction between the young couple had been mutual, to a certain extent. Ruth would not have been human not to have been gratified by the attention and respectful admiration which she received from the handsome, aristocratic young man, whose familiarity with social life had served to invest him with

a polish and bearing that were extremely pleasing to her as to every one.

He was twenty-three years of age, possessing a fine figure, an attractive face—though, to a careful student of physiognomy, there were certain lines indicative of an ease-loving, self-indulgent nature, without much depth or strength of principle to balance it—a pair of bright, mirth-gleaming brown eyes to match his waving hair, a ready smile, and a fluency of speech that was one of his chief charms.

He had been very kind, courteous, and entertaining, always treating her as a lady and an equal, showing her many delicate attentions that won for him a warm place in her heart, until, as she said, she began to realize that, "aside from her father and mother, she had never cared so much for any one."

But "love"—passionate, eager, and exacting, such as he manifested for her—she was not quite sure that the sentiment that she experienced towards him could be so designated.

She sat with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks, after his last triumphant assertion that she belonged to him, and he would soon remove from her mind all doubt regarding her affection for him.

Surely she had never liked any one so well; she was always happy when she was with him; she missed him when he was absent, and eagerly looked forward to his return; indeed, her last thought at night was of the enjoyment his companionship had afforded her during the day—her first thought in the morning one of anticipation of what the day would hold for her in connection with him.

But was this "love" such as he expressed? did she "worship" him? would she feel that her "life would only be complete with him for her constant companion?"

These were questions which, for some reason, she could not satisfactorily answer at that moment.

"Ruth, love, why do you not tell me that I may claim you?" the young man at length questioned, as he leaned forward to look into her averted face. "You have twined yourself so effectually about my heart that I cannot live without you."

The fair girl shot a half-frightened glance at him from beneath her golden-fringed lids.

"Surely you do not mean that?" she murmured, in a startled tone.

"Indeed I do!" he cried, excitedly. "Could you bear to have me go away and never come back to you?"

Ruth shivered, and turned slightly pale.

"I had not thought of such a thing," she said. "It would be very lonely; I— I believe I should miss you more than I can express."

"Then I am sure you love me, darling," cried the young lover, his face lighting eagerly while he drew to his heart the small hand he held. "You must love me—you must tell me that you love me—you must promise that you will marry me, or—I must go away. I cannot go on living with you here from day to day and know that you can never be mine."

"But, Mr."—

"Ralph," he interposed, with fond authority.

"Well, then—Ralph," she repeated, a shy smile flitting over her lips, a lovely flush mounting to her white temples, "I am afraid you ought not to have said this to me—I am afraid Mr. and Mrs. Plympton would not approve."

The red blood suffused the young man's face at this; too well he knew that they would not approve.

"I do not see why they should not approve, my darling," he fondly replied; "but even if they could find the slightest objection to you, I do not think such an argument should be allowed to weigh against the happiness of two lives," he continued, gravely. "I am of age—I know my own mind, I have an independent fortune, and in choosing my wife I intend to please myself, though if my choice meets the approval of my parents, I shall only be so much the happier."

He looked very handsome and manly as he said this, and Ruth thought him very noble; indeed, his words thrilled her more than anything he had ever said, and she told herself that he would make a kind and loving husband—he would be

tenderly thoughtful for her, and she believed—she would be happy with him.

"Dearest, do you think the opinions of others should be allowed to interfere and part two people who truly love each other?" Ralph continued, after a moment, as she did not reply.

"No," said Ruth, looking up and speaking with an accent of decision.

"And if you were sure you loved me, and that I was in any degree worthy of you, would you allow any one to part us?" questioned the young lover, eagerly.

"No," she answered again, "and yet—I should shrink from causing any trouble—it would make me very unhappy if, through me, there should be a rupture between you and your parents."

Her companion's eyes lighted; he believed that he should gain his point, and to have his own way was the one aim of his life.

"Which would be the worse?" he questioned, "to blight my whole life—as it will be blighted if I lose you—and send me out into the world again, a lonely wanderer, my existence a burden because shorn of every hope for the future, or to temporarily offend the pride of an over-fond father and mother? I do not say that the latter would be the fact; I am only supposing the case, to argue my point. Ruth, I love you with all my heart. I believe you love me in return. We are congenial in our tastes. I have abundant means to enable me to make life pleasant for you, and there is no earthly reason why we should not follow the dictates of our own hearts. We will go to Europe. We will travel the old world over, stopping here and there as our fancy prompts; and when we are weary of roving, you shall choose the spot on which to make a permanent home. Darling, shall we go together and be happy, or—will you send me away alone, too wretched to care to live?"

The picture had been vividly portrayed. The face of the pleader was eloquent with love and inexpressible yearning; while the thought of losing him and his pleasant companionship out of her life for ever caused a sudden thrill of dismay

to sweep through the heart of the orphan girl beside him.

She lifted her lovely face to him.

"Oh, Ralph, I cannot tell you to go away," she said.

"And you love me—you will be my wife?"

"Yes, I know I care more for you than for any one else in the world."

CHAPTER IV.

TWO ENRAGED WOMEN.

Fate steals along with silent tread,
Found oftenest in what least we dread;
Frowns in the storm with angry brow,
But in the sunshine strikes the blow.

Half an hour after Ruth had pledged herself to Ralph Plympton, and while the lovers were absorbed in the happiness resulting from their new relations, a messenger came from the house to tell her that she was wanted—that Mrs. Plympton had returned, and required her services.

"My mother returned!" exclaimed Ralph, springing to his feet in surprise. "Why, she was not expected until to-morrow!"

Ruth, with rapidly-beating pulses, gathered up her work and went swiftly towards the mansion, but with a strange feeling of depression settling upon her heart.

She found Mrs. Plympton in her private sitting-room, when the woman greeted her in a matter-of-fact way, as if she had not been away at all, then set her about some work which she professed to be in a great hurry to have completed.

In this way Ruth was kept busy all the evening, and had no opportunity to see Ralph before retiring, as he was detained by his mother in the drawing-room until a late hour.

The young girl, as she sat quietly sewing and thinking, was almost frightened at what she had done. Still, at the same time, an undercurrent of happiness pervaded her spirit, for it was a source of great comfort to her to feel that her future was provided for; that she would no longer be homeless or friendless; that there would be no more need to toil a

certain number of hours every day for her support.

She was a little disappointed that Ralph did not try to see her before retiring, if only to bid her a hasty good-night; she was even more dismayed and astonished upon learning, the next morning, that he had left home—his father having despatched him upon some important business which he had not time to attend to himself.

She thought it very strange that he did not leave a note for her, explaining his sudden departure, but she was soon enlightened upon this point.

She was scarcely seated at her work, when Mrs. Plympton swept into the sewing-room with haughty mien, her stern face denoting some relentless purpose, her fine eyes blazing with wrath.

"Ruth Reynolds," she began, in a tone that pierced the girl's heart like a knife, "so you have dared to promise to marry my son!"

As this unexpected thunderbolt fell out of her apparently cloudless sky, the girl's hands dropped nervelessly upon her lap, her scissors fell clattering to the floor, and her thimble rolled to the farther side of the room, while, before she could recover herself sufficiently to speak, the enraged woman went on, with increasing passion:

"You little, insignificant 'country rustic! you—beggar! with nothing in the world to recommend you but your baby face, do you think I would tolerate you as my son's wife? Oh, I never would have believed that he could make such a fool of himself if I had not heard him with my own ears! I was warned of what was going on here, and so returned just in time to catch you at your shameless scheming. Here I have kept you under my roof—given you a home for two years, only to have you turn and sting me like this! Put down your work! Pack your trunk, and—begone from my sight!"

Ruth gazed at the woman in speechless astonishment and with wondering eyes.

She never would have believed that the elegant and fastidious Mrs. Anthony Plympton could have so far forgotten

herself and her position as to fly into such a towering rage and use such unbecoming language under any circumstances.

This fact did more towards restoring her self-possession than anything else could have done.

"I am her superior—I have more self-control, more native courtesy, for I would never allow myself to thus address the lowest person living," she said to herself, as she quietly arose from her chair and confronted her angry companion.

"Yes, I will go," she remarked, as calmly as if she had been asked to do the woman a favour; "but, Mrs. Plympton, don't you think it would have been more just if you had required your son to explain how I came to promise to marry him?"

"Silence, girl!" commanded the haughty woman, but flushing to her brow as she was made to realize how she had lowered herself by her unlady-like demeanour. "Do not presume to argue this question with me, but leave my house with all possible dispatch. And—let me warn you," she continued, in a menacing tone, "if you dare force yourself upon my son again, I—will crash you!"

The angry mother did not wait to observe the effect of her threat, but, turning abruptly, swept with a stately bearing from the room, while the gentle girl, who had so faithfully served her for two long years, went to her own to prepare to go out again into the world a homeless wanderer.

* * * * *

Two days later, on a bright, perfect afternoon, a handsome carriage drew up before a quiet but eminently respectable hotel in New York.

Two people alighted from it; the elder an aristocratic-looking young man, clad in the height of fashion, every garment being of the richest material and latest cut. A fine diamond gleamed conspicuously upon his immaculate shirt-front, his silk hat shone like a piece of satin, his gloves were without spot or blemish, and the jaunty cane which he carried was a most unique and expensive affair.

His companion was a young girl of

slight, graceful proportions, quietly but tastefully dressed in a travelling suit of brown broadcloth, a pretty hat of the same colour surmounting her golden head, and gloves to match upon her slim hands.

But, ah! the face that shone, like a flawless pearl, beneath the rim of that dainty hat! It was like an ideal picture that, once seen, could never be forgotten.

The eyes of the gentleman gleamed with deepest tenderness as he assisted her to the ground.

"My darling!" he whispered, in a low, intense tone, whereupon his companion flashed a luminous smile up at him.

Just at that instant another carriage rolled by the hotel. A dark, brilliant woman, very richly, almost gaudily dressed, sat within it.

As she caught sight of the young couple a low, startled cry escaped her, and she leaned from the window for a second look at them, when an ugly frown swept over her face—a hiss of wrath escaped her intensely scarlet lips.

"Traitor!" she breathed, her black eyes glowing like coals of fire, as they followed the unconscious objects of her wrath on their way into the house; then the carriage rolled on and mingled with other vehicles in the avenue.

The young man conducted his fair companion to a reception-room, then left her to go to the office to register his name.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Hartmann," we read as we glance over his shoulder, to watch, with pardonable curiosity, the hand that traces the name.

But the face and form are those of Ralph Plympton, and it is evident that, although he desires, for the present, to conceal his identity, he has managed, by some means, to balk the plot of his proud parents to separate him from the girl he loved and take the reins of fate into his own hands.

After registering the name he sought his bride and then followed the obsequious attendant to their room, where, the door once closed and locked, he turns and catches that slight, brown-clad figure to his breast.

"My wife!" he cries, in an eager,

impassioned tone, "mine! all mine, so long as we both shall live!"

"Are you sure you will never regret what you have done to-day, Ralph?" she questioned, after a moment, and pushing him gently back that she may look searchingly into his eyes.

"Regret, love! There is no such word for me where you are concerned. I am the happiest man alive, and to-morrow we shall be on the ocean sailing towards another world, where we will live an ideal life, and no one to interfere with us. Are you not happy, sweetheart?" he concluded, smiling fondly down upon her.

A tiny hand crept up about his neck, a pair of red lips met his in soft caress, and, though no words issued from the lips of the youthful bride, the ardent husband was evidently satisfied with her answer.

Later, after they had lunched and returned to their room, where they were chatting about their prospective voyage, Ralph abruptly inquired:

"Are you sure, Ruthie, that you have everything you wish or need for your trip? Remember, there are no shops on shipboard, so you had better set your brain at work to see if there are not some few last things that you would like."

"Oh, Ralph! you have already given me more things than I know what to do with, but if you really want me to spend some more money I'll try and oblige you," laughed the pretty bride and flashing a roguish look at him. "Let me see—yes, I think I must have a pound of 'Huyler's best,' a—a flask of violet water, and a bottle of that 'Crown Sal Volatile,' like what you bought your mother for headaches."

"All right, I will get them for you after I have had my smoke," the young man returned, rising to go below to enjoy his habana and look over the papers.

"No; let me go out to get them while you are smoking," Ruth responded. "I noticed as we drove here that there are several shops just round the corner. I can easily find my way to and from them, and you'll have your cigar finished by the time I get back, while I shall not have to stay alone."

"As you like, sweetheart," Ralph

fondly replied, and pulling a roll of notes from his vest pocket, he slipped a couple into her pretty hands.

As he did so a folded paper dropped out upon her lap.

"What is that?" she queried, picking it up and unfolding it. "Oh!" she added, with a slight start, "this belongs to me—it is our marriage certificate, which was given to you this morning, after the ceremony."

"That is so," Ralph remarked, as he gently attempted to take the paper from her.

"Wait a minute, Ralph, please; I want to read it through—I never saw one before," pleaded the young bride, with an absorbed air, but without relaxing her grasp upon the document.

The young husband frowned slightly, but made no further opposition to her request; then, lightly touching his lips to her forehead, he sauntered from the room, choosing his cigar from a handsome case as he went.

Ruth seated herself by a window and read the paper carefully through, heaving a little sigh of content as she finished it.

"I am glad I have seen this," she murmured, musingly, "and—I—I think I will keep it. Oh, dear! I haven't any pocket in this dress," she continued, as she involuntarily put down her hand to find it. "and Ralph has the key to my satchel. Never mind—I'll put it here until I come back from my shopping, then I will take care of it."

She opened a Bible that lay on the table beside her, and placed the marriage certificate carefully between the leaves.

Then donning her hat, she went out to make her purchases.

Ah! upon what trivial acts one's future destiny sometimes hinges.

CHAPTER V.

OUR YOUNG BRIDE HAS A FRIGHTFUL ADVENTURE.

Jealousy seeks its prey—

Something to tear with sharp-edged tooth and claw.

After her exciting interview with Mrs. Plympton, Ruth went to her room with an almost breaking heart,

and experiencing a keen sense of injury from the fact that her lover had left her to battle alone with the overbearing pride and arrogance of his mother.

Had Ralph repented of his love-making and proposals, and at the instigation or command of his parents coolly deserted her? It seemed very like it, and yet Ruth was so true herself, she struggled bravely to still retain her faith in him.

There was, however, only one thing for her to do. She had been summarily dismissed, so out of the house she must go.

But where?

She did not know; she had lived such a life of seclusion there at Hazelwood Heights that she had hardly made an acquaintance, and now had not a single friend to whom to turn in her extremity.

But she packed her trunk, as she had been bidden, and while she was thus engaged a servant came to tell her that the coachman would soon be ready to take her wherever she wished to go, and at the same time handed her an envelope from her mistress.

It contained the wages due her, and a month's extra pay. She put what she had earned into her purse; the surplus he returned to the envelope, addressed it to Mrs. Plympton, and pinned it conspicuously upon her cushion.

The man came for her trunk; she put on her hat and outer garment, and, without a word of farewell from any one, entered the carriage, and told James to take her to the railway station at Albany, although, as yet, she had not the faintest idea where she would find a shelter when the night came.

She had almost reached the city, when a horseman suddenly galloped by the carriage. The next moment he had wheeled about and cried out to James to "Stop!"

The man obeyed.

"Where are you going?" the young man demanded.

"To take Miss Ruth to the station."

"Miss Ruth!"

In an instant he had dismounted, and was gazing, with a white, anxious face, in at the carriage window.

"Ruth, what is the meaning of this?" he sternly demanded, as he looked searchingly into the girl's startled face.

She told him in a few brief sentences, and then almost regretted that she had done so as she saw the expression of anger that swept over his face. It made him look so like his mother when she had swooped down upon her hardly an hour before.

"Did you get my note?" he questioned.

"No," she answered; but her face brightened at the inquiry.

"Ah," he exclaimed, a queer smile wreathing his lips, "I begin to see that there is a deep-laid plot to separate us! I thought it very strange that I should be hurried off to Chicago upon such short notice—that it should be so 'important' that I should catch the earliest west-bound express. But, strangely enough, when I arrived at the station, I discovered that I had carelessly left at home my memorandum-book, in which there was important matter, so I procured a saddle-horse to enable me to return for it as quickly as possible. What did you think of me, Ruth?"

"I—I did not know what to think," she confessed, with drooping eyes and crimson cheeks.

"I left a note upon your table, explaining my sudden departure," Ralph remarked, "but, evidently, it was discovered and intercepted. I am no boy, however, to be outwitted in any such fashion," he added, with a frown, an obstinate expression settling about his mouth. "Well, my darling," he went on, after a moment of deep thought, "I want you to let James take you to the station, as it is understood he will do, but wait there until I come to you; will you?"

Ruth gave the required promise, then, with her trust in her lover fully restored, she exchanged a cheerful good-bye with him for the benefit of the coachman—who, seated upon his box outside, had been unable to hear anything of their low-toned conversation—and went on her way, while Ralph, springing again upon his horse, did likewise.

He did not go far, however. A quarter

of a mile farther on he turned about, and taking another road, hastened back to the city. In less than half an hour after James had deposited his charge at the station, he rejoined Ruth, and to her proposed an immediate marriage.

At first she proudly refused, declaring that she would never ally herself with a family who had so scornfully rejected and insulted her.

But Ralph Plympton had never been accustomed to be denied anything that he wished, consequently he finally succeeded in overruling her scruples and obtaining her consent to his proposal, although it was reluctantly given.

Then he took her to the home of a woman who had once been a servant in his family, where he left her to spend the night, while he went to make arrangements for a private marriage the following morning, and to prepare for another European tour.

He called for her early the next day, and they went to the office of a justice of the peace, where the simple ceremony was performed, when they immediately left in the express for New York.

Upon their arrival there Ralph took his bride upon a shopping excursion, and recklessly lavished money upon her until she was dismayed and begged him to desist. Then he drove to the hotel, as already related, where they were to spend the night, with the intention of sailing for Europe on the following day.

After Ralph went below for his smoke, our fair young bride easily found her way out into the street, sought the nearest drug store, where she procured the toilet accessories of which she had spoken, and then proceeded farther down the street, in search of a confectionery establishment, to get her box of "Fluyler's best."

She was obliged to walk some distance before she could find the coveted dainties; then, after having made her purchase, she started forth to retrace her steps to the hotel.

She made the most charming picture imaginable as she stepped into the street. Her pure, almost flawless face was slightly flushed; her blue eyes gleamed with pleasurable excitement over the

novel experience of shopping by herself in the great city; a happy smile wreathed her red lips, and there was a little consequential air in her bearing, as if, already, she had begun to realize that she had attained the dignity of a matron.

Her rich, brown travelling-suit and hat were vastly becoming to her clear complexion, and harmonized delightfully with the pure gold of her hair—those

Sunny locks

That hung o'er her temples like a golden fleece.

She had paused a moment to put her purse safely into the chatelaine bag that hung from her waist, and which had also been one of her purchases, when, at that same instant, a carriage stopped in front of the store, and a lady swept out upon the sidewalk with a rustling of silken robes and a fluttering of ribbons and laces that at once attracted the attention of our fair young bride, although she did not observe the start and look of hate that flashed over the stranger's face as she caught sight of the charming little figure that had just emerged from the store.

"What a splendidly beautiful woman! She looks like some brilliant gipsy queen!" Ruth murmured, under her breath, and then paused for another look as the tall, stately form came towards her.

But suddenly she halted almost beside Ruth, and looking back over her shoulder, remarked to her coachman:

"Brown, you can turn the horses; I have changed my mind and will make no more visits to-day."

Then she wheeled suddenly round, throwing out one hand in a careless fashion as she did so, and thus—apparently without dreaming she was near any one—jostling Ruth and knocking her box of candies to the ground.

It struck upon a corner, bursting both wrapper and box, and scattering the confectionery in every direction upon the pavement.

"Oh! I beg your pardon!" exclaimed the beautiful stranger, in a tone of well-assumed dismay. "How very careless of me! I am very sorry."

"Never mind, madam," Ruth good

naturally replied: "it was only an accident"—

"It was inexorable," interposed her companion, with a brilliant but deprecatory smile, "and you must allow me to atone. Come back into the store with me, and I will replace your lost treasures."

"Oh, no—thank you"—Ruth began, flushing, yet involuntarily bestowing a rueful glance upon her scattered sweets.

"Indeed, I will not take a refusal," the lady hastily rejoined; "it is only right that I should make amends."

And playfully laying her exquisitely gloved hand upon Ruth's arm, she gently drew her back towards the store.

Ruth had no choice but to obey, so she followed her within, where the stranger purchased another box of the finest mixture to replace what she had wasted.

She then gave an order for herself, paying for the whole at once, while she chatted in a charmingly social manner with the young bride, who thought her the most fascinating person she had ever met.

They left the store together, and when they stepped out on to the pavement the lady exclaimed, as if the thought had just occurred to her:

"By the way, you are walking. Have you far to go?"

"Only to — street and to the Ellsmere Hotel," Ruth responded.

"Ah, my way lies directly by the Ellsmere. Pray let me drive you there," said her companion, eagerly, adding, "I have caused you so much delay it is only fair that I should make up for it in some way, Miss — Excuse me, my name is Gordon," she concluded, with an alluring smile.

"And mine is Ray—Plympton," returned Ruth, with some confusion at having so nearly forgotten that she was a married woman.

"Ray Plympton," repeated Miss Gordon, with a peculiar inflection upon the surname; "that has a very attractive sound."

"No; I did not mean to tell you just that," said the fair little bride, blushing

again and laughing out with sweet ingenuousness. "My name, until this morning, was Ruth Reynolds, but I came near forgetting that I have been married almost seven hours."

A flash of lurid fire blazed in her companion's eyes for a moment; then she also gave vent to a light laugh.

"Married! Why, you seem scarcely more than a child!" she exclaimed, but with lips that had grown almost as white as the filmy lace about her throat. "And how could your husband trust you alone in the streets of New York, and you a bride of only seven hours?"

"Oh, I wanted to come out by myself to do a little shopping, for we are to sail for Europe to-morrow," Ruth explained.

Miss Gordon caught her breath sharply at this explanation, and stooped to open her carriage door in order to hide the sudden pallor that she knew had overspread her face.

"Ah!" she remarked, quickly recovering herself, a slight smile of scorn curling her lips as she realized how unsophisticated the young wife was to talk thus freely of her private affairs to a stranger, "so I suppose you are going to European your bridal tour. Really, I feel that my adventure this afternoon has been romantic. But pray get in," she went on, motioning inside the carriage, "and let me drop you at your hotel; or that husband of yours may begin to think you are lost; and, let me tell you, it wouldn't be an easy thing to find you, if you were once really lost in New York."

And Ruth, too guileless herself to suspect guile in others, trustfully stepped within the elegant carriage, thinking with what exceeding kindness and graciousness Miss Gordon was conducting herself towards an entire stranger.

Meantime the lady turned and gave some order to her coachman in an inaudible tone, after which she followed her guest inside, and the vehicle started.

Miss Gordon thereupon became extremely entertaining, keeping up such a brisk conversation with her companion that Ruth entirely forgot that her ride should have been a very short one, and did not observe that she was being car-

ried in a wrong direction until the carriage suddenly turned into a broad, quiet avenue, where the houses were wide apart, when the marked change from the noise and bustle of the other streets caused her to start and look out of the window.

"Why, Miss Gordon! where are we?" she exclaimed, in a voice of astonishment. "I am sure you have made a mistake; this is not the way back to my hotel."

"No?" queried Miss Gordon, in an indifferant tone, but shooting a mocking glance at the young wife out of her dusky eyes.

Ruth caught it, and a shock of dismay went thrilling through every nerve in her body as it suddenly occurred to her hitherto unsuspecting little soul that she had read of similar instances, when young, unwary girls were trapped and abducted by treacherous people in the great city, while her companion's words, "It would not be an easy matter to find you if you were once really lost in New York," appeared, all at once, to have acquired a peculiarly ominous meaning.

She turned and confronted the stranger, studying her face with keen scrutiny, an unaccustomed dignity and resolution pervading her manner.

"Miss Gordon, where are you taking me? We have been riding a long distance," she gravely remarked.

"Yes?" said the other, in the same tone as before; a short, sly laugh escaping her lips. "I thought perchance you might like to see something of our city and take a little drive in the Park."

Ruth grew pale as snow at this strange reply.

"No, I do not care for a drive. You will please stop your carriage, Miss Gordon—I wish to get out," she said, with quiet imperativeness.

Again Miss Gordon laughed—a low, malicious little ripple, sweet as a strain of music, but so full of mirthful wickedness that Ruth shivered, a terrible fear that she might be in the power of some lunatic taking possession of her.

But she was also becoming indignant as well as frightened.

"Do you understand me, madam?" she cried, starting to her feet, her blue

eyes flashing with a spirit and resolution that one would hardly have accredited her with possessing.

"I regret, for your sake, that I cannot accommodate you, Mrs. — Plympton," sneered the strange girl beside her, as she forcibly pushed her back into her seat, "and I presume it will surprise you somewhat when I inform you that I have no intention of allowing you to sail for Europe to-morrow with Ralph Plympton!"

For a moment Ruth was rendered speechless with horror and amazement as this ominous announcement fell upon her ears. Then, with a terrible fear gleaming in her beautiful eyes, she faltered out:

"Miss Gordon, what can you mean? Do you know my husband? And what is your object in seeking to separate us by so audaciously entrapping me?"

"Do I know Ralph Plympton? Well, I rather think I do," retorted the brilliant beauty, a hiss of intense hatred in her tones. "I know also that I—Inez Gordon—should have been his bride to-day, rather than you; that, in spite of the tie which you claim unites you to him, he rightly belongs to me. You have stolen him from me with your pink-and-white face and those blue eyes; but you shall never triumph over me with your boasted wifehood; and, since he has played me false, let him suffer the consequences. His bride will not sail for Europe with him to-morrow."

CHAPTER VI.

A BRIDE'S STRANGE EXPERIENCE.

His life was gentle; and the elements
So mix'd in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world: 'This was a man.'

Ruth Plympton sat like a statue of snow, utterly dazed by her companion's astounding and incomprehensible assertions, while she stared with speechless horror into her face.

What could be the meaning of those terrible things that Inez Gordon had said? Where and when could Ralph have met her? What relation had they borne to each other? Could it be that

he had become acquainted with her during the two years that he had spent abroad? Had he flirted with her—perhaps deceived and deserted her, as her words seemed to imply?

These were some of the thoughts that flashed with lightning-like rapidity through Ruth's brain as she sat there tongue-tied, a sickening sensation—as if she were losing her grasp upon all that made life desirable—creeping over her and benumbing her heart and senses.

She had believed in Ralph thoroughly; she had thought it very noble and manly of him to insist upon making her his wife—giving her, a homeless, friendless girl, his protection, in spite of his parents' scornful rejection of her as unworthy to mate with him. Even though she had shrunk from an elopement and a secret marriage—some monitor within seeming to admonish her that some time he might regret the step he had so impulsively proposed—yet she had admired him for his constancy, and regarded herself as a very happy and fortunate girl to have won such a husband.

But now, to be thus unexpectedly confronted by what appeared to be an unsavoury chapter out of his past life—a chapter that seemed to smack of wrong and treachery to a beautiful girl—it was a shock to her sensitive nature, her high sense of honour, that was positively paralyzing.

"I cannot understand—I do not believe you," she at length managed to falter.

Again Inez Gordon laughed out mockingly, as she looked into the little bride's white face, and saw reflected there something of the doubt and misery which she had aroused in her heart.

"Of course not," she sneered. "Ralph Plympton is doubtless in your estimation a man above all other men in point of honour and rectitude—a god to be worshipped. He surely could not stoop to make love to one woman while virtually pledged to another! He could not lure and charm the very soul out of a girl on the other side of the Atlantic; then, upon his return to his own country, coolly throw her over for some one else! Oh, no; your husband is your hero—your

ideal, immaculate, and above reproach! But, look you! he has made a fiend of that other girl!—not because she has broken her heart for him, by any means—that she did for another man before she ever met him—but because he deceived and played with her; and you know the old adage about 'a woman scorned,'" she concluded, with a passionate vindictiveness that was appalling in one so young and beautiful.

A look of sorrow and pity had crept into Ruth's lovely eyes as she listened to the above tirade.

"Miss Gordon," she gently returned, when the girl paused, "I am sure there must be some mistake about what you have told me. I cannot believe that Ralph would so wrong any human being. Possibly you are speaking of some entirely different person from my husband"—

"Faugh! So you would try to shield him with that insufficient mantle, would you?" interposed Miss Gordon, with angry impatience. "But let me undeceive your trusting soul. I was driving by the Ellsmere only two hours ago, and saw you both when you arrived; so there cannot be the slightest mistake regarding the identity of the man of whom I have been telling you. I met Ralph Plympton abroad, where he trifled with me beyond all forgiveness, and now I am going to make him pay dearly for his amusement. But who are you?" she rudely interposed, while she leaned forward, a vengeful fire smouldering in her dusky eyes, and studied the exquisite face before her.

"You told me," she went on, before Ruth could reply, "that your name was Ruth Reynolds. That sounds well enough, and you are not bad looking, either. But what were you? What were your family and position, to tempt that weak, self-indulgent fellow to throw me over for you?"

Ruth flushed hotly beneath this rude and imperative inquisition, and then her blue eyes flashed a quick look of defiance into the mocking, angry face beside her.

She straightened her slight, perfect figure a trifle, and gravely replied, with

an air of quiet dignity that would have become a queen:

"Really, Miss Gordon, as you are an utter stranger to me, I do not feel called upon to discuss my family affairs with you."

A slight smile of amusement curled the lips of the proud beauty at this spirited retort.

"Really!" she sarcastically exclaimed. "For a little brown sparrow just from the country, that was very well done. With a little practice, under proper training, I think you might rid yourself altogether of that air of rusticity that unmistakably proclaims your breeding."

Ruth threw back her sunny head in a gesture of proud yet exquisitely graceful superiority.

"It is apparent that you are city-bred; you are, evidently, what is termed a society woman; but, all the same, you are 'unmistakably' a very rude person," she said, with a slow gravity and positiveness that brought a quick blush of mingled shame and anger to the cheek of her companion.

"Now," Ruth continued, with an air of imperativeness that was wholly foreign to her accustomed gentleness, "you will please stop your carriage, for I am going to get out."

But Miss Gordon sneered audibly.

"Oh, no, my pretty brown sparrow, you will not be allowed to do that," she said. "You forget that I have decreed that you shall not make that European tour with my faithless lover."

Ruth's beautiful blue eyes blazed dangerously at this mocking taunt, and her scarlet lips parted, as if to make an equally scathing retort; but she seemed to think better of her impulse; and checking herself, she leaned forward and laid hold upon the strap attached to the window of the carriage.

Miss Gordon, comprehending her intention, struck her hand violently down.

"Don't you dare attempt to open it!" she hissed, between her white, set teeth.

Ruth sank back, white and trembling, for the woman frightened her with her fierce, passionate words and manner, and

again the thought came to her that she might be in the power of a madwoman.

She did not, however, utterly lose her self-possession, and while she appeared to shrink from and yield to her for the moment, she was evolving in her mind some plan by which to outwit her captor and regain her liberty.

It was a strange experience for a young bride on her wedding-day, and she began to fear that her situation was precarious, especially as she now observed that the distance between the houses along the way was becoming greater, for the man had been driving very rapidly during the last fifteen minutes.

Suddenly the carriage turned a corner and into a narrower street; then the horses were checked, and finally came to a halt close beside the kerbing.

Ruth's heart leaped for joy. Now she would at least make an effort to escape, she thought.

Miss Gordon lowered the window on her side of the carriage.

"What is the matter, Brown?" she sharply inquired.

"A funeral, mum," the man responded.

"Oh!" cried Miss Gordon, catching her breath and losing something of her colour. "You did well to stop, for you know I'm always afraid of getting mixed up in a procession of that kind. But I'm in a great hurry. Turn about, go back to the next street, and round the other way."

"Yes, mum, as soon as this 'ere hearse gets out of my way."

"And, Brown"—

But Ruth did not hear what followed, for at that instant her attention was attracted by the figure of a man who had paused upon the pavement just opposite and close to the window where she was sitting.

There was something strangely familiar about his face, although at that moment she was labouring under such nervous excitement she did not give that fact a second thought.

He did not appear to notice her at all, but was gazing, with a look that was full of bitterness and contempt, beyond her upon Inez Gordon.

"He knows her! he does not like her! he will help me!" was the little captive bride's mental comment, as quick as a flash she seized the strap, let down the window, and reaching forth her daintily-gloved hand, laid hold upon the stranger's arm with nervous, eager fingers.

"Help me! oh, let me out!" she cried.

The pleading blue eyes, the sweet, anxious face were more eloquent than the verbal appeal; but before the stranger could act or respond, Inez Gordon had discovered what was going on.

"Ah!" she cried, as she savagely laid hold upon Ruth's arm with her disengaged hand. The other was still holding the window.

"Turn quickly, Brown—quick!" she added, with sharp imperativeness; then, letting go her hold upon the sash, she would have seized Ruth with both hands, but the window fell, catching her sleeve, thus effectually imprisoning her arm and rendering her almost helpless.

Then the carriage began to move, but at that instant the man upon the pavement laid hold of the handle of the door, which he quickly swung wide open.

"Come!" he said, holding out his hand to Ruth.

"She shall not!" almost shrieked Inez Gordon, as, blind with passion, she struggled to retain her grasp upon Ruth.

Then glancing up to get a better view of the young wife's deliverer, she suddenly uttered a sharp cry of agony.

"Heavens! where did you come from?" she gasped, with white lips, then sank back in her seat, her strength seeming to desert her, leaving her powerless to prevent Ruth from springing out of the moving vehicle at the risk of life and limb.

But her new friend put out a strong arm to save her, while at the same time he bowed mockingly to Miss Gordon, a smile of bitter triumph wreathing his fine lips as he looked steady defiance into her baffled but despairing eyes.

The door swung to of itself, from the impetus given by the turning vehicle, and the next moment that petrified figure was whirled out of sight round the corner, and the fair young bride—the "little

brown sparrow"—was saved from the talons of the hawk.

But she was nearly helpless, now that all danger was over, and stood, white, panting, trembling, while she clung to her companion for support.

"Try to be calm, my dear young lady," the gentleman kindly remarked. "You are perfectly safe, and I shall be happy to serve you further in any way that I can. Suppose we walk a little way from this funereal neighbourhood," he added, as he glanced back at the gloomy array of carriages that had so appalled Miss Gordon.

He began to move down the street as he spoke, and Ruth observed that he limped as he walked.

Then she noticed that he was deformed—one leg was somewhat shorter than the other, and his left shoulder was lower than its fellow.

The feeling of sympathy that at once flooded her tender heart made her forget herself, and did much towards helping her to recover her composure, while at the same time she was struggling to remember when and where she had previously heard that deep, rich-toned voice.

"You are very kind, sir," she began, as she lifted a grateful glance to his face.

Then she stopped short, a look of startled recognition leaping into her eyes.

"Why," she cried, "this is the second time that you have saved me from a great danger!"

The gentleman looked astonished at her words, then bent a searching glance upon that beautiful, upturned face.

"Can it be possible?" he said, while a luminous smile lighted up his whole countenance. "Yes, it is the same young lady who lost her purse upon one of the Fall River boats two years ago! Well, strange things happen in this world!" he added, a look of peculiar sadness leaping into his eyes. "I hardly expected I should ever meet you again, although I have often wondered what became of you and also of that cowardly wretch who assailed you."

But even though she had recognized him, Ruth found it difficult to believe that he had ever been the splendidly

formed man who had so gallantly come to her rescue on that memorable occasion.

She could have wept, too, as she looked upon his misshapen figure, observing the halting step, and how thin he had grown, although even now his frame was massive and showed traces of its former noble proportions.

His face was pale, and betrayed evidences of keen suffering, both physical and mental; but it was a face whose power of attraction was something wonderful. When she had seen him before, she had thought him a remarkably handsome man; but now there was something more than mere regularity of features and healthful colouring to charm the eye: truth, nobility, and a peculiar refinement, together with an inexpressible sadness, were stamped upon every line, while the grave, sweet, brown eyes and the luminous smile that at times played about his sensitive mouth would have drawn the most timid child to him.

"Oh, I am so glad it happened to be you again to-day," Ruth exclaimed, with the frank ingenuousness of a child. "That dreadful woman frightened me nearly to death. Do you know who she is?"

"Yes, I have known her for some years," the gentleman quietly replied, but with a sudden coldness in his tones. "How came you to be with her, and evidently such an unwilling companion?"

Ruth briefly related her strange adventure, and wondered to see the peculiar changes of expression that flitted over the gentleman's face as she did so.

"She is the strangest person I ever met," she concluded, with a shiver of repulsion. "It almost seemed to me as if she must be deranged."

"I imagine she is, and hopelessly so," returned her companion, his lips curling with a touch of scorn and bitterness; "morally, mentally, and spiritually; there is no one more hopelessly deranged than a soulless woman. And so you are Ralph Plympton's wife?" he added, suddenly changing the subject and regarding her with peculiar earnestness.

"Yes; we were married this morning. But do you also know my husband?"

Ruth questioned, flushing, but looking surprised.

"No, Mrs. Plympton, I have not that honour, but—I have heard of him. Now allow me to introduce myself."

He passed her a card as he spoke, and she read upon it the name, "Basil Meredith."

CHAPTER VII.

"TEARS ON ONE'S WEDDING-DAY ARE
OMINOUS."

Hateful to me, as are the gates of hell,
Is he who, hiding one thing in his heart,
Utters another.

Ruth's heart thrilled with sudden tenderness, and tears rushed unbidden to her eyes, as she read the name of the man who, for the second time, had come so opportunely to her aid.

She had once had a dear brother who had been called Basil, and who had died when he was only ten years of age.

Thus the fondest memories were associated with the name; then, too, it meant so much—royal, kingly, it was interpreted; and, looking up into the noble face beside her, she was sure that those attributes must be prominent features of Basil Meredith's character.

"Thank you," she said, with lips that trembled with repressed emotion. "I have often wished that I might know your name. And now," she added, lifting an anxious glance to him, "I really have no idea where I am—New York is like an unexplored labyrinth to me; so if you will kindly put me in a way to get back to the Ellsmere Hotel, I shall be obliged to you. I am sure that Mr. Plympton must already have become greatly alarmed over my long absence."

"Certainly I will; I was upon the point of proposing the same thing to you," her companion responded, adding, "If you will walk with me to the next corner, I will get a carriage for you."

They at once bent their steps thither, and presently the young wife was seated in a vehicle.

"Now you will soon be safely back at the Ellsmere," Mr. Meredith remarked, a

luminous smile lighting up his whole face as he closed the door, after having assisted her to enter, "and I can vouch for the reliability of the driver, as I have known him a long time."

"You are very kind, Mr. Meredith, and I thank you more than I can express," said Ruth, as she impulsively put out her hand to him in farewell.

He took it, holding it a moment in a gentle, friendly clasp, then released it.

"I am very glad that I happened to be near to give you assistance," he returned, as he lifted his hat and bowed to her in farewell.

She gazed wistfully after him, wondering if she would ever meet him again, as he stepped forward to speak to the driver, and the next moment she was rolling rapidly down town, feeling devoutly thankful over her escape from the power of that malicious, unprincipled woman.

She was wholly unconscious, however, that her new friend and champion was seated upon the box beside the coachman, he having resolved not to leave her until she was safe under the protection of her husband, although he had delicately refrained from appearing to force his added obligation upon her.

When the carriage stopped before the Ellsmere Hotel, Mr. Meredith alighted on the opposite side and stood in its shadow, while the driver assisted his passenger to the ground.

He stood there quietly watching her until she disappeared within the hotel, when he entered the carriage, and was driven back up town.

Ruth had scarcely crossed the threshold of the house, when Ralph came flying towards her, looking white and anxious. He had seen her alight from the carriage while watching for her from the reading-room, which commanded a view of the entrance.

• He had been out in the street several times in search of her, for he had become very much alarmed over her absence.

"Ruth, my darling, where on earth have you been all this time?" he exclaimed, as he reached her side and eagerly grasped both her hands.

"Oh, Ralph, I have had such a

strange adventure!" the young wife remarked, as she clung to him, and heaving a long sigh of relief as she realized that she was safe with him once more.

But at the same time her blue eyes searched his face with unwonted earnestness, as she recalled the strange things that Inez Gordon had told her regarding her "faithless lover."

"An adventure! I should imagine so, indeed, from the time you were gone," Ralph returned. Then he added, a frown of annoyance sweeping over his face, "Who was that humpbacked fellow on the seat with the driver?"

"Oh, Ralph," Ruth cried, in surprise and flushing, "did he come all the way with me? I am sure I did not know it; but it certainly was very kind of him. But he isn't really humpbacked; one shoulder is deformed, and it is such a pity, for he is a perfect gentleman—the very nicest one I have met in a long time, and"—

"Oh, indeed! 'Thank you!'" interposed the young husband, in a jealous tone.

"There, dear; you know, of course, I was not thinking of you when I said that," said Ruth, nestling closer to him. "But really he is a thorough gentleman, in spite of his deformity, and he helped me out of a dreadful situation."

"Well, well! tell me about it," was the somewhat impatient rejoinder.

"Wait, please, until we get to our own room," Ruth returned, in a low tone, as she glanced at some people who were passing them.

Nothing more was said until they were in their own apartment, and the door closed, when Ruth, seating herself where she could note every expression of her husband's face, proceeded to give an account of what had befallen her during her absence.

Ralph sat quietly listening until she spoke of her acceptance of the strange woman's offer to take her back to the hotel, when he exclaimed, excitedly:

"You precious little goose! didn't you know better than that? You never should accept such attentions from an utter stranger, especially in a great city like this."

"I ought to have known better, I own," returned Ruth, flushing; "but she seemed so kind and friendly, so truly a lady, that I did not once think of imputing any wrong motive to her; although I realize now that she exerted a strong influence over me, and I seemed to be acting under her will rather than my own. I soon found out, however, that she was a perfect fury, or, possibly, she may be deranged, as Mr. Meredith said," she concluded, shooting a troubled glance at her companion.

"Mr. Meredith?" repeated Ralph, inquiringly.

"Yes, the gentleman who came home with me," Ruth explained, as she passed him the card that had been given to her.

Then she went on to tell how she had not observed that she was being carried in a direction opposite to that which should have been taken until they turned into a wide avenue, when she had demanded a reason for such a proceeding.

"But what could have been her object? Who was this woman? Didn't you learn her name?" questioned Ralph, with eager curiosity.

"Yes; she told me that her name was—Inez Gordon."

"Inez Gordon!" repeated Ralph Plympton, in a hoarse, startled tone, and with suddenly whitening lips. "Inez Gordon! Who—who on earth is she?" he added, making a mighty effort to recover himself.

"Ralph," cried the young wife, with a sharp note of pain in her tones and a terrible heart-sinking as she observed his emotion, "don't try to deceive me or to cover up anything. If you have made any mistakes in the past, it would be more noble to acknowledge them, and I would far rather have you tell me truly than to feel that there is any secret to stand as a barrier between us in the future. This girl has evidently known you well, and there can be no mistake regarding her identity, for she told me that she happened to be driving by this hotel when we arrived to-day, and recognized you. She declared that she ought to have been your wife rather than I; that you had played her false. She

called you her 'faithless lover,' and confessed that she had deliberately decoyed me for the purpose of separating us and making you suffer. Now, Ralph, tell me the truth—do not let us begin our life with a wretched mystery overshadowing it. Who is this Inez Gordon? What has she been to you in the past? There must be some reason for what she has done to-day—some cause for the revengeful feeling she cherishes against you."

There was an awkward silence for a moment after the young wife concluded, during which Ralph Plympton sat with a white, averted face and sullen, moody brow.

At last he looked up and met Ruth's wistful, inquiring eyes, the expression of keen pain on her beautiful face smiting him with a sense of remorse.

"The girl must be mad—deranged, as you have said—to fill your head with any such nonsense," he remarked; but his eyes wavered and his tones did not have the ring of sincerity and truth in them. "I did meet Inez Gordon in Paris, while I was abroad—I got in with a set of Americans there, and had a rather gay time for three or four months—and from the moment of our introduction she showed a decided preference for my society; indeed, I may as well confess that she plainly betrayed that I needed only to propose to her to have her accept me. But as for my ever committing myself to her, it is false—a lie! 'Faithless lover,' indeed!" he interposed, indignantly. "Why, Ruthie, darling, I never loved any one but you. That girl has Spanish blood in her veins, and there is altogether too much thunder and lightning in her composition to suit me."

"Ralph! Ralph! you are sure? You must not deceive me!" cried Ruth, springing to his side and searching his face for a moment with troubled eyes.

Then she threw herself, weeping, upon his breast, and sobbed:

"Oh, I could not live, bound to you all my life, knowing that you had loved and been false to another!"

Ralph Plympton folded his fair wife close in his arms and soothed her with fond, loving words, and yet, even while

thus engaged, there was a look on his face that was not pleasant to see.

"My darling—my own!" he murmured, with his lips pressed against her cheek, "can you doubt that my heart belongs to you when I have made you my wife in spite of all opposition? I suppose I could have married Inez Gordon if I had wished, and doubtless she imagines herself deeply aggrieved because, since I paid her some friendly attention, I did not fall a willing victim at her feet. She has a large fortune in her own right, and is a descendant of an old English family, in which there is a slight mixture of Spanish blood. The governor and my mother would have been delighted with the match, because of her money and position, but, once having seen my sweet little wood violet, she had no charms for me. There, there, Blue Eyes—little wife—dry these tears, or I shall begin to think that you have no confidence in your husband; and tears on one's wedding-day are ominous."

He wiped them away with his own handkerchief as he ceased speaking, and kissed her again fondly.

"But," began Ruth, sitting up and looking earnestly into his eyes—"but why did you pretend not to know Inez Gordon when I first spoke of her?"

The young man flushed at the unexpected question, and then he laughed lightly.

"Well, to be frank, little one, I thought that if she hadn't told you any nonsense, it might be just as well that you should not know that we had ever met."

"Oh, Ralph, please always be true! It is so much easier to overlook a mistake confessed than wilful deception to conceal it," Ruth earnestly returned.

Again the young man flushed hotly, and a spark of anger leaped into his eyes at being thus admonished.

If he experienced an impulse to respond sharply, however, he restrained it, and simply answered:

"I will, love. Now kiss me, and then we will drop this unpleasant topic for ever."

He put his lips to hers, to receive the

caress he had solicited; but Ruth, laying her two small hands upon his shoulders, and pushing him gently back so that he might gaze directly into her eyes, asked:

"And, Ralph, you have never made love to that strange, beautiful woman, or given her reason to believe that you loved her?"

"Never, my own," he unhesitatingly answered.

And yet, even as he said it, his mind reverted, with a strange sense of uneasiness, to a certain evening when he and Inez Gordon had sat together, in a secluded arbour, during a fête at Versailles, and listened to the intoxicating strains of a fine band, and been conscious only of the alluring music and the presence of each other.

He remembered how the brilliant girl had swayed him, exerting—as Ruth had but just expressed it—"a strange influence over him, until he seemed to be acting under the power of her will rather than of his own;" how, almost before he was aware of the fact, he had found his arms around her supple form, and her head upon his breast, while their lips had met in caresses which, even now, he could not recall without a thrill of mingled ecstasy and repulsion; how they had remained there, in each other's embrace, until the music had ceased, when, being joined by friends, they had strolled back to their carriage, but still under that mystic spell.

Not a word of love had been exchanged, but Ralph Plympton well knew that Inez Gordon had every reason—every right, indeed—to believe and expect that he would ask her to be his wife before another day should pass.

And yet, when they met the next morning, he had greeted her in a friendly, matter-of-fact manner that at once proclaimed he had no such intention, whereupon, after one eager, passionate, searching look into his face, she deliberately turned from him with a malicious smile on her lips, that had made him shiver whenever he had thought of it afterwards.

That same day he left Paris, and they had never met since.

He regarded it as a very unfortunate as well as a very singular circumstance that Ruth should have fallen into the hands of the proud beauty that afternoon, and upon her wedding-day, too! Really, it gave him an uncanny feeling, a disagreeable presentiment that it might have an ominous bearing upon their future.

But his chief desire now was to restore his wife's confidence in him, for he could plainly see that it had been somewhat shaken, and thus he had answered her in the positive, unhesitating way as above.

But the little bride was not quite satisfied, even yet, and with her great blue eyes still gravely fastened upon his, she continued:

"And are you quite sure, Ralph, that, if you should ever meet Miss Gordon in the future, she would have no influence over you? that you could greet her with a clear conscience, and without a regret for what you have done to-day?"

"My darling, Inez Gordon could never have any but a repelling influence upon me, especially after the treatment you have received at her hands. So kiss me, love, and let us forget her."

CHAPTER VIII.

A SILENT LOSS.

Full from the fount of joys delicious springs
Some bitter o'er the flowers its bubbling
venom flings.

So Ruth kissed her husband and tried to assure herself that she was perfectly satisfied with his explanations, and that Inez Gordon, governed by spleen and wounded vanity, had falsely accused him.

She was a sweet-tempered little body naturally, and, having made up her mind to drop the subject, she exerted herself to dispel the small cloud that had arisen upon the horizon of their newly-wedded lives.

After dinner Ralph took his bride to the theatre to pass away the evening.

It was not the theatre season, but an enterprising company, taking advantage of the fact that most of the places of amusement were closed, was running a

light opera that proved to be very popular, and so played to a crowded house almost every evening in spite of the heat.

Our young couple soon became absorbed in the play, and, as they were strangers in the city, paid no attention to the people about them.

The curtain had just fallen on the third act, and the electric lights were turned on, thus flooding the whole auditorium with a blaze of light, when some occult influence irresistibly drew Ralph Plymton's eyes to the left-hand proscenium box. He had glanced that way once before, but, up to the beginning of the third act, it had been unoccupied.

Now, however, there were three people in it—a gentleman and two ladies, in full evening dress, and a great shock went quivering through every nerve of the young man's body as he instantly recognized Inez Gordon in one of the ladies, and saw that her *lorgnette* was levelled directly at him.

He had never seen her so handsome as she appeared at that moment. She was elegantly dressed, in satin, laces, and jewels, and made a brilliant picture, seated among the rich draperies of the box.

Her white teeth gleamed at him an instant, and her red lips curled in a malicious smile, as she saw him look up, but he turned quickly away, without appearing to have seen her, and did not once glance that way again.

He kept his gaze steadily fixed upon the stage, but he took little note of the performance, and could not have described a character that appeared from that time until the opera was over.

He became nervous and restless; so much so that Ruth feared that he had become weary of the play, and proposed to go. He would not run away, however, although he would have been very glad to do so, for he was conscious that those dusky eyes of Inez Gordon never once turned their gaze from him.

There seemed to him to be something almost supernatural about that steady, unwavering look; some peculiar influence that made him feel as if he had been bound hand and foot, figuratively

speaking, and was on the verge of being sacrificed to appease the wrath of a beautiful fiend.

He was sincerely thankful when the performance terminated and he was released from the disagreeable spell.

"To-morrow we shall be beyond her reach—a week hence the broad Atlantic will divide us," he muttered, as he impatiently made his way among the crowd towards the *foyer*. But just as he reached the entrance, and was about to step outside, some one from behind touched him on the shoulder.

He started nervously and glanced back.

An usher lifted his hat to him, slipped into his hand a card that had been twice folded, and the next moment disappeared among the crowd.

With a shiver of dread, the young man stealthily tucked the bit of pasteboard into a vest pocket, and then hastened out into the street.

On reaching the hotel, he left his young wife to retire, while he went below, ostensibly for his customary smoke, but in reality only to get an opportunity to examine that card which had so strangely come into his possession.

Ralph Plympton was no coward, but that same uncanny influence that he had experienced in the theatre still seemed to be upon him, while cold and sharp little prickles, like thrusts from the point of a needle, ran up and down his spine and thrilled along his nerves.

Once outside his room, he strode to the nearest light, snatched the card from his pocket, unfolded it, with a not too steady hand, and read the single word:

"Vendetta!"

It was written in a pretty, ladylike hand, but every letter of which it was composed seemed to be alive with a certain baleful influence that made his flesh creep anew.

"What a fool I was, ever to let her lead me on as she did!" he muttered, under his breath, as he tore that piece of pasteboard into atoms and then threw them away.

Then he went downstairs and out into the street, where, forgetting to smoke, he

walked up and down the pavement for half an hour, absorbed in troubled thought.

It was late the next morning before Mr. and Mrs. Plympton left the hotel to go to the steamer, which was advertised to sail at noon.

There was some delay and confusion, as there always is, in getting their baggage off, and the young couple had only time to reach the pier and get safely on board the *Germanic* when the last whistle was blown.

They stood together on deck, watching the movements of the sailors and the men on the pier as they removed the gangway and threw off the ropes, observing the final farewells, the waving of hands and fluttering of handkerchiefs between some of the passengers and their friends on shore, while the great vessel swung slowly away from her moorings, when suddenly Ruth startled her husband by uttering a sharp cry of pain and dismay, while she seized his arm and lifted to him a face as white as marble.

"Oh, Ralph, Ralph, what have I done?" she cried, tremulously.

"My darling, what do you mean? What troubles you so?" he inquired, alarmed by her looks and tones of distress.

"I am so sorry! We must go back! I cannot go on!" she faltered, and clinging to him with trembling hands.

"Ruth, hush!" he returned, in a low, imperative tone, for he feared her strange emotion would attract the attention of their fellow-voyagers. "You know we cannot go back," he added, more gently. "Now tell me what disturbs you so."

"Oh, Ralph, I have forgotten that certificate—our marriage certificate! I left it in the Bible on the table," the young wife explained, in great agitation. "I had no pocket, the bag was locked, and you had the key, so I just placed it between the leaves, intending to give it to you again when you came up, but so many things have happened since that I never once thought of it until now."

A look of dismay swept over Ralph Plympton's countenance at this informa-

tion; but it passed almost instantly, and the next moment he smiled reassuringly into the pale, distressed face looking so pathetically up into his.

"Is that all?" he questioned, lightly. "Why, from your manner I almost began to fear that you had repented of having become Mrs. Plympton, and was upon the point of repudiating the name and deserting me," he added, in a bantering tone. "It was a careless thing to do, I admit," he went on, more gravely, "but it is a matter that can easily be remedied."

"Can it? How?" eagerly questioned Ruth, while the frightened look began to die out of her eyes.

"You know the pilot goes out beyond Sandy Hook with us, then returns to New York. I can send a message by him to the proprietor of the hotel, asking him to look for the paper immediately, and post it to our address in London."

"Oh, can you do that?" cried the young wife, in a tone of intense relief.

"Certainly, and we shall doubtless receive it almost as soon as we arrive, as another steamer will sail within a couple of days, so do not grieve your heart any more about it," the young man concluded, fondly.

"I am very, very glad," sighed Ruth, looking greatly comforted.

"Well, even if it should not be found—even if we should never see it again, it wouldn't be such a serious matter," her husband continued, and desirous of banishing the look of anxiety that still rested on her brow, "for we could easily apply for a copy; and besides, there are the records to corroborate the fact if it should ever be disputed, which is absurd to contemplate."

"True," thoughtfully responded Ruth; "still, I would rather have the certificate, and I cannot forgive myself for my carelessness—so many things are liable to happen, you know."

"Well, dear, do not give the matter another thought; I will not have our honeymoon spoiled by useless regrets," returned the young husband, with playful authority; and drawing her hand within his arm, he began to walk about

the vessel, striving to interest her in the novel sights around them, and hoping thus to distract her thoughts from the unpleasant subject.

Yet Ralph Plympton himself was more disturbed over the incident than he would have been willing to acknowledge, while for days afterwards it seemed as if some mocking fiend were ringing in his ears, continual changes upon those last significant words that Ruth had uttered—"so many things are liable to happen you know."

So many strange things had already happened during the last twenty-four hours, that he found himself growing nervous, oppressed, and apprehensive, although he could not have given an adequate reason for such a state of mind.

He knew that he had been guilty of a rash act in persuading Ruth to marry him upon the impulse of the moment, as he had done; in braving his father's wrath and his mother's pride, and assuming the responsibility of the young girl's happiness and their united expenses upon an income which, though ample for a couple governed by reasonable desires, had hitherto been hardly adequate to cover even his own individual expenditures.

Then, again, Ruth's adventure of the previous day had admonished him that imprudences of the past were liable to arise to confront him in a most awkward and uncomfortable fashion, and when he least expected them. Again, that threat of vengeance that had been thrust into his hands on leaving the theatre the night before still gave him, whenever he thought of it, a very unpleasant sensation, something like that of standing over a slumbering volcano which, at any moment, was liable to become active and destructive.

And now, to cap the climax, the difficulty proving his marriage with Ruth had been lost, and although he did not really attach any importance to this latter circumstance, it was nevertheless another unfortunate incident to help swell the list of his annoyances.

But he was young and sanguine—he never allowed himself to dwell long upon

anything of a troublesome nature, if he could avoid doing so, and thus he sought to throw off the unusual sense of depression that had assailed him.

After reassuring Ruth as above, he took her down to their state-room, where leaving her to arrange their belongings according to her own ideas of comfort, he sought an officer of the vessel, and, telling him that he had left something behind in New York, asked what would be his surest and quickest way of getting a message to the proprietor of the Ellsmere Hotel.

The man told him that a special delivery letter would be the most expeditious method of accomplishing his object, and Ralph accordingly penned a note to the manager of the Ellsmere, telling him where the missing certificate could be found, and asking him to post it immediately to the address which he would find enclosed.

This he delivered, together with a liberal fee, into the hands of the pilot, with instructions to post it as soon as he landed; then, feeling that he had done all that was necessary, and he need have no further anxiety regarding the matter, he went below to seek for Ruth.

She also seemed to have regained her accustomed serenity, and appeared perfectly reassured when Ralph told her what he had done.

Lunch was served soon afterwards, and they hastened to the dining-room, hungry and eager for their first meal on ship-board. They were fortunate in securing good seats at the table, where they gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the present and the pleasant occupation of studying the faces and characters of their fellow-voyagers, who on their part were not long in making the discovery that they had a bride and groom on board, and accordingly became deeply interested in the devoted couple.

After the meal was over they went upon the hurricane deck for a promenade, and Ruth became enthusiastic over the pure bracing air, the rolling waves, and the novelty of this her first experience upon "the wide, the boundless sea."

They had just made their second turn,

and were chatting away like two happy children, when Ruth suddenly stopped short in some remark she was making and uttered a cry of astonishment, which instantly attracted the attention of a gentleman who stood near them, and who had been leaning idly against the shelter that protected the gangway leading to the deck.

He turned and looked searchingly into her rosy, animated face, started slightly, then moved towards her, a luminous smile lighting his whole countenance, while he lifted his hat in a respectful salutation.

The stranger was Basil Meredith!

CHAPTER IX.

"SHE WILL BE A WRETCHED WOMAN ALL HER LIFE."

Joy comes and goes, hope ebbs and flows

Like the wave;

Change doth unknit the tranquil strength of men.

Yes, Basil Meredith was also a passenger on the *Germanic*, and bound upon an important, yet very trying, errand abroad.

"Oh, Ralph," Ruth exclaimed, the moment she recognized him, a note of eager pleasure in her tones, "this is the gentleman who was so kind to me yesterday. Mr. Meredith, this is a delightful surprise. And now let me introduce my husband, Mr. Plympton."

The two gentlemen greeted each other cordially, although Ralph did not fail to recall, with a secret twinge, his pretty wife's remark of the previous day regarding her new acquaintance, that he was "the very nicest gentleman that she had met in a long time."

He could but own, however, that she had reason for thinking so, as he looked into the handsome, refined, and intelligent face; noted that luminous smile, which was its chief charm; the deep, soulful, brown eyes, and the grandly-shaped brow above them.

He thanked him, with a few well-chosen words, for the service he had rendered his wife the day before, and then, ignoring

the strange events that had led up to it, adroitly changed the subject.

"I had not the remotest idea, Mrs. Plympton, when I bade you farewell yesterday, that we would be fellow-travellers to-day," Basil Meredith remarked to Ruth, after a slight pause in his conversation with her husband.

"Neither had I," she answered, smiling brightly up at him, "but I am sure I am very glad. I was sorry when I parted from you to think that I might never meet you again," she ingenuously concluded.

"Thank you," he returned, meeting her lovely eyes with an earnest look, in which there was a certain wistfulness that touched her deeply. "What trifling incidents sometimes throw together people who otherwise might never have met, and give them a lifelong interest in each other!"

"That is true," the young wife gravely responded, but flushing at the delicate compliment implied in the words "lifelong interest," yet thinking that the incidents which had thrown them together upon two different occasions had been anything but "trifling," at least to her.

"I trust you are none the worse to-day for the harsh treatment you received yesterday," Mr. Meredith observed, a light cloud flitting over his countenance.

"Oh, no," Ruth replied, although she lost something of her brilliant colour as she recalled all that occurred, and the anxious fears and doubts that had arisen in connection therewith; "but all the same"—with a nervous little laugh—"I am very glad to get away from New York."

"They stood chatting for a few minutes longer, then Mr. Meredith excused himself and went below.

"Isn't he nice, Ralph?" Ruth questioned, eagerly, as soon as he was beyond hearing.

"Indeed he is; but it is a great pity that he is out of shape," the young man returned, with a deprecatory shrug of his own fine, broad shoulders.

"And he had such a splendid physique when I saw him before; he bore himself like a king, and walked with a step as

proud, firm, and elastic as your own. I wonder what terrible accident has deformed him," said Ruth with a sad face and a regretful sigh.

"He looks as if he had been very ill," Ralph responded, "and somehow, he impresses me as also having some heavy burden on his mind."

"Yes, I observed that too," the young wife remarked. "I wonder if Miss Gordon could have anything to do with it. Her knew her instantly, yesterday, and she acted very strangely when she saw him. Then, when I asked him if he thought she might not be deranged, he said, with such a strange look and tone, that there could not be much doubt that she was hopelessly so—that there was no one more hopelessly deranged than a soulless woman."

"Humph!" said Ralph, thoughtfully, "that was rather a peculiar remark; he must know her well to have said that. You did not mention it yesterday."

"No, I did not think of it; neither did I think to tell you that he said he had heard of you. I wonder how!"

Ralph wondered also, and, putting this and that together, he came to the conclusion that Mr. Meredith must have heard of him through his acquaintance with Inez Gordon.

"They met him every day after that, and found him extremely genial and entertaining. Ruth, particularly, was very strongly attracted to him, her warmest sympathies being excited in his behalf on account of the unaccountable sadness that seemed to enshroud him, and also because of his deformity.

He lent her several entertaining books, of which he appeared to have an unlimited supply, while sometimes he would come to sit beside her and read aloud some entertaining sketch or bit of poetry, after which they would fall to discussing its merits, and thus every interview served to reveal to her something new and more to be admired in his character.

He could be merry, too, and often would make her laugh heartily by relating some amusing anecdote, while he himself always seemed brighter and happier for their little bit of fun.

One day she remarked to him :

"You have escaped sea-sickness as well as we. Are you never ill during a voyage?"

"No, even though I have crossed the Atlantic many times; but—I have other ills to bear that are far worse than sea-sickness," he returned, glancing down, with a sad smile, at his misshapen shoulder.

It was the first time that he had ever referred to his misfortune, and Ruth flushed sensitively, and yet she was touched that he should feel friendly enough with her to speak of it.

"Ah, do you suffer from that?" she gently inquired, a pitiful gleam in her lovely eyes.

"Intensely, at times; it is for that I am going abroad," he said. "I have tried all kinds of treatment in my own country, and now I am going to Paris to see what French surgery can do for me. I am not what I was, Mrs. Plympton, when I met you two years ago," he concluded, with a sad smile.

"How—did it happen?" Ruth questioned, softly.

The inquiry might have seemed curious and almost impertinent from any one else, but the tone, the look, the slight quiver of the sweet, sensitive lips, told her companion that her whole soul was thrilling with sympathy for and womanly interest in him.

But the effect which it produced sent a terrible shock quivering through the fair young wife, for the man suddenly grew deadly white, while his face became almost convulsed with agony over some blighting memory which her query seemed to have aroused.

"Oh, forgive me! *don't* tell me! I should not have asked that," she tremulously faltered, an expression of dismay sweeping over her own features.

"Nay, do not be troubled or reproach yourself," he replied, reassuringly, as he quickly recovered himself. "It is a great comfort, believe me, to a lone man situated as I am, to know that there is even one true, gentle woman in the world to feel an interest in him. My deformity," he went on, the lines about his

mouth hardening a trifle, "was caused by an accident, shortly after I met you, two years ago."

He paused a moment and then resumed, in a cold, repressed tone :

"A few months previous to that time, I had learned to love, and believed I had won, a very beautiful woman. To me she seemed to be the most perfect being in the wide world, and I allowed myself to make a veritable idol of her. We were to be married just one month after my meeting with you. A few days later we went together to call upon a friend, and it seemed to me that there could be no one living so inexpressibly happy as I was that day in the companionship of my betrothed.

"I had just assisted her to enter the carriage, after leaving the house of our friend, and was about to follow, when a newspaper was blown beneath the feet of my horses, and they instantly took fright. I sprang to their heads, and tried to hold and calm them, but, with that paper still rattling about their heels, they became utterly unmanageable, and, though I checked them just long enough to give my companion time to spring uninjured to the ground, I was thrown beneath them and terribly trampled upon, the carriage also passing over me, as they sprang forward in their mad flight.

"I was taken up unconscious, and for weeks my life was despaired of. When I finally began to mend, it was to learn that I was a hopeless cripple. Of course, I could not bow submissively to such a terrible decree, and persisted in trying every skilful surgeon within my reach. The most that any of them have done for me has been to give me temporary relief from my pain; they tell me that is all I can expect. But I am young—only twenty-seven—and I rebel against the prospect of a long life of suffering, to say nothing of being hampered with this misshapen body; so I resolved to make one more effort to better my condition, and my present errand abroad is to test the skill of certain renowned surgeons in France. I am obliged to confess, however, that I have but little hope to cheer

me on my way," he concluded, in a tone that was inexpressibly sad.

Ruth uttered a long sigh of regret as he ceased, while two great tears, escaping from beneath her golden lashes, rolled over her cheek and fell upon her hands as they lay upon her lap.

Basil Meredith saw them, and started slightly, while a flush arose to his temples.

"Ah, pray do not grieve like that for me," he said, in an unsteady voice. "I am unused to sympathy, for I live almost the life of a recluse, having no relatives. Even the woman from whom I had the right to expect so much turned from my misshapen body in contempt the first time she saw me after my accident, and coolly informed me that she could never marry an unsightly cripple."

"Oh, how utterly heartless!" breathed Ruth, in a shocked tone; "and after you had saved her life at the risk of your own, and at such a sacrifice!"

"Yes, there can be no doubt that my promptness in checking the horses was her salvation," said Mr. Meredith.

"Then she owed her life, her deepest gratitude and love, to you. She should have regarded it her highest privilege to devote her future to you and your comfort," cried the young wife, earnestly.

"But she did not love me, you perceive," responded Basil Meredith, in a bitter tone.

"How could she help it?" Ruth impulsively exclaimed, as she lifted a look half of wonder, half of admiration to him; and then she blushed rosily at her own words.

Mr. Meredith's gloomy brow cleared, and he laughed out musically.

Then removing the cap from his head, he bowed low before her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Plympton; I have not had such a genuine compliment for years," he said; then added, with a strange thrill in his tones, "If I could only have had a sister like you to turn to during these years of trouble and suffering, I should have been a far happier man. However," he went on, straightening himself, and lifting his fine head proudly, "although the awakening from that fair dream of my life was a rude one, I have

since been thankful that it was a timely one, and have come to regard the author of what was once a bitter disappointment with only pity and contempt. There is nothing so pitiful and despicable as a soulless woman."

"Ah," thought Ruth, with sudden enlightenment, "that 'soulless woman' was Inez Gordon; she never could have really loved him, or she would not have thrown him over. What if he is a little deformed and lame?—he is perfectly grand, morally and intellectually, and any woman might be proud to be his wife! That was two years ago," she went on, musingly; "then it could not have been so very long ago that Ralph met her. I wonder if she really cared for him? Ah, no"—with a sudden start—"for she told me she had 'broken her heart for another before she ever met him'! Then she did love—as well, perhaps, as she could love any one besides herself—Basil Meredith, and it was only her pride that kept her from marrying him. She was like a ghost yesterday, when she saw him, and there was in her eyes a look of despair that told of keen suffering."

She seemed so grave and thoughtful, Mr. Meredith began to fear that he had saddened her with his doleful story.

"I am afraid I have wearied you," he gently remarked. "Pray, Mrs. Plympton, do not let what I have told you weigh upon your heart for one moment. I hardly know how I happened to tell you this story, that has never passed my lips before, unless it was because your gentle and womanly sympathy charmed it from me."

"I am thankful that you deemed me worthy of your confidence," Ruth gently returned; "but it was a dreadful thing for that woman to turn coldly from you when you needed her most."

"I should have offered her her freedom, even if she had not repudiated me," the gentleman quietly returned. "Do you not think she would be justified in accepting it?"

"Justified! No! No true woman would have listened to such a suggestion. She would have clung to you all the more fondly."

"But it would be a sad thing to have a peerlessly beautiful woman bound to such a shapeless clog"—he began, bitterly.

"Don't! oh, please do not speak like that!" Ruth interposed, a wave of pain creeping over her beautiful face. "This"—just touching him with the tips of her taper fingers, while she lifted her wonderful eyes, in which there was almost a look of reverence, to his—"this is not the real you; that no accident could change; that would still have been hers; and she will be a wretched woman all her life to have lost so much."

The young man gazed at her wonderingly for a moment. He was profoundly touched. His lips were tremulous, and, but for his manhood, he could almost have wept over her divinely comforting words.

"Mrs. Plympton," he said, at last, but in a voice that was far from steady, "you are the sweetest comforter in the world. You shame me; and, henceforth, I will try to be worthy of the tribute you have just paid me."

CHAPTER X.

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS
BEFORE."

Fate steals along with silent tread,
Found oftenest in what least we dread,
Frowns in the storm with angry brow,
But in the sunshine strikes the blow.

For several days afterwards Ruth was almost constantly haunted by the sad story that Basil Meredith had related.

Again and again she would seem to see the look of pain that had clouded his expressive brown eyes; the sensitive quiver about his mouth; the pallor that blanched his face to the hue of marble, and the beads of agony that lay upon his massive brow as he spoke of the great sorrow of his life. She never forgot the vivid word-picture that he had portrayed for her—that graphic sketch of those prancing, terrified horses, as he vainly strove to control them; while that beautiful girl, intent only upon her own safety, had sprung to the ground. She saw the swaying carriage, that proud

form thrown to the earth and ruthlessly trampled beneath the iron hoofs. She saw him lying there, bleeding and unconscious, while the heavy vehicle rolled over him; then, later, upon his bed, where he had spent long months of suffering, which was supplemented by even greater mental agony, upon learning that the woman he loved was false—that she had heartlessly forsaken him; leaving him to drag out his broken life alone in bitterness of spirit too deep for expression.

"How could she? Oh, how could she have done it?" Ruth often found herself saying over and over to herself. "How could she have given a second thought to the maimed body—that had been sacrificed for her—when, all her life, she would have that grand, ideal face to look into and smile back at her; those great, truthful, loving eyes to beam affection upon her; those tender lips to kiss her, and that great, true, self-sacrificing heart to beat only for her?"

But after such reveries as these she would suddenly start, her face flushing with a sense of guilt, as if, somehow, she had been disloyal to Ralph, in allowing herself to feel such excessive reverence and admiration for any other man. Still, she told herself that it was only pity for his loneliness and sympathy for his infirmity that caused her to feel such an interest in him.

The voyage was a delightful one, and Ralph Plympton and his pretty wife made many pleasant acquaintances; but the friendship that was formed between them and Basil Meredith was destined to bear results in the near future that neither of them dreamed of at that time.

On the very last day of the voyage a singular incident occurred; one which, although it seemed utterly intangible in the way of utility, seemed to Ruth to have a peculiar bearing upon certain facts connected with the strange story that she had learned from her father a short time before his death.

She had just come up on deck after lunch, and was passing round one end of the saloon to get to her chair, when she suddenly came upon two individuals

whom she had not seen before since the steamer sailed.

One was an elderly gentleman, who was enveloped from his chin to his heels in a travelling-ulster. He wore a fur cap upon his head, the side pieces being drawn down over his ears, while a voluminous muffler was drawn round his neck. His face—what could be seen of it—was pale and thin, and he seemed almost too feeble to walk, for he leaned heavily upon the arm of his companion, who evidently was his servant, and carried a cane in his other hand.

His attendant was also somewhat remarkable in appearance. He was of medium stature, rather thick-set, and apparently about forty-five years of age. His skin was a dark olive, without a particle of colour to relieve its swarthy hue; his eyes were rather small, but intensely black and piercing, with a cunning, sinister gleam in their midnight depths; while his hair was as white as snow—as was also the full beard that entirely concealed the lower portion of his face.

The moment Ruth came opposite this strange-looking couple, the younger man gave a violent start, and uttered a sharp exclamation of astonishment.

"Eh, what is it?" exclaimed the invalid, turning upon him with alert curiosity. "What made you jump like that, John Payne? Ah!—aha!—ah!" he ejaculated, as his own glance now fell upon the fair young wife, while he halted directly in her path, thus barring her progress, and stared at her beautiful face with a look of astonishment, almost amounting to wildness.

"Good heavens, Payne! is it that picture come to life?" Ruth heard him mutter under his breath.

At the same moment his cane dropped from his nerveless hand and fell directly at her feet; whereupon a mighty shock went quivering through her own frame as she involuntarily glanced down upon it.

It was an elegant affair of some highly polished wood, but the head was the exact counterpart of the thumb-piece of that key which Sir Amos Rothwick had sent to her great-great-grandmother when

he was dying; only it was made of gold and most beautifully and skilfully wrought.

It was the Rothwick coat of arms—a thistle above two olive leaves!

Ruth Plympton's own face lost every atom of colour as she stood there looking down upon that peculiar device.

The next moment the servant had lifted the cane and returned it to his master, who, after bestowing another searching, curious look upon the face that had startled him so, averted his head, turned nervously away, and passed on.

"How very strange!" Ruth murmured, as she turned to gaze after him. "Who can they be? That disagreeable, Spanish-looking man he called by the very English-sounding name—John Payne; but I would give a great deal to know his own. That cane would seem to indicate that he must be a Rothwick; but I have seen nothing like the name upon the passenger list."

She drew a tablet from the pocket of her cloak as she spoke, and sinking down upon the nearest chair, began to study it attentively.

"No," she said, with a sigh of regret, after her eager eyes had searched the entire passenger list, "not even the name of John Payne is here. The only clue to the identity of either that I can find are two persons registered as 'N. Roswell and servant.'"

"But I am impressed that that old man is akin to my mother," she continued, thoughtfully. "That cane alone would seem to prove it, for it is not likely that any but an heir of the house of Rothwick would carry about its coat of arms so conspicuously. Then, too, how startled they both appeared as they came upon me so suddenly; and that strange remark about some picture coming to life! Can it be possible that I, four generations removed, resemble the portrait of some member of the Rothwick family?"

She sat there a long time, musing upon the singular adventure, and then she went roving about the steamer, in the hope of encountering the strange couple again.

But they were nowhere to be found, and she did not see them again;

although, upon making inquiries of one of the stewards, she learned that there was on board an old gentleman, who was very much of an invalid, and closely confined to his state-room, where he demanded the constant attendance of his valet or confidential clerk, whichever he might be.

The next day the *Germanic* steamed safely into port, when its many passengers, who had lived so harmlessly together for a week, vanished, as if by magic, and went their several ways.

Mr. and Mrs. Plympton and Basil Meredith travelled in company as far as London, where they also were obliged to part, as Ralph and his wife were to remain in the English metropolis for a couple of weeks, while Mr. Meredith had arranged to go directly to Paris.

"I am going to the St. Antoine Hospital," he gravely told them, as he was taking leave of them, "where I expect to undergo a painful operation within a few weeks. If I get safely through it," he corrected, with a quick glance at Ruth, "it will doubtless take me some time to rally from the shock to my system, and it would give me great pleasure, as well as help to break the monotony of my long confinement, to receive an occasional visit from you, since you tell me that you are to be in Paris for several months."

"Oh, we will surely come to see you," Ruth exclaimed, a great pity shining in her blue eyes, while a sharp pain, like the thrust of a knife, had pierced her heart when he spoke in that doubtful way of the possible result of the coming operation. "We surely will not neglect to visit you as soon as we are allowed, will we, Ralph?" she concluded, turning to her husband to conceal the tears that would start in spite of her efforts to repress them.

"No, indeed; we will not fail to look you up immediately upon our arrival," he heartily responded the young man.

Then, with cordial but regretful farewells, they separated, each with a fear that they might never meet again.

Then there began a round of pleasure and sight-seeing for Ralph and his wife in great, busy, bustling, interesting London.

Of course, he had been over the same ground before, but it was a source of intense enjoyment to him to watch Ruth's delight and enthusiasm over every spot which they visited.

The little lady was exceedingly well versed in historical lore, and he was obliged to look well to his own laurels while acting as her guide over famous localities and through the many noted palaces, &c., which they visited.

They had been in London less than a week, when Ralph received a letter from the proprietor of the Ellsmere Hotel, where they had stopped while in New York.

But it proved to be a very disappointing epistle, for the gentleman wrote in response to the young man's inquiries regarding the lost marriage certificate, that although he had caused a thorough search to be made immediately upon learning of its loss, the document could not be found.

It certainly was not in the Bible, he said, where Ralph had claimed it would be discovered, for he himself had carefully examined the volume, while he also had caused the closet and dressing-case to be thoroughly searched.

He remarked that a chambermaid had put the apartment in order for another guest directly after their departure, and upon questioning her, she had admitted that she had gathered up some papers from the floor and thrown them out into the rubbish bins, but even a careful overhauling of these receptacles had failed to bring to light the important paper. He concluded by courteously expressing his regret over his failure to find it, and trusted that no unpleasant results would follow the loss.

Ruth grieved sorely over this frustration of her hopes, for, to her, it seemed that the possession of her marriage certificate was a matter of great importance.

But Ralph, though he was somewhat irritated over the occurrence, said it was really of no especial consequence, for there was plenty of evidence to prove that he had legally married her. Although he had not registered his full name at the hotel, he had caused it to appear on

the passenger list of the *Germanic*, while he had also introduced her to numberless people as his wife. Besides all this, there was still the justice, to whom they could appeal, if necessary, and at the back of him the records to vouch for the lawfulness of the ceremony.

Yes, it all seemed very clear that their marriage could never be questioned; and so the little wife was reassured, and concluded that the loss of the certificate did not really matter very much, after all.

Alas! how much grief a little carelessness will sometimes entail! What may seem but a "trifle" to-day may become a mountain to crush us to-morrow.

A little incident, which also seemed but a "trifle" at the time, occurred in New York on the very day that our newly-wedded couple sailed for Europe.

About four o'clock in the afternoon a small urchin, about ten years of age, stood at the corner near the Ellsmere Hotel, with a bundle of papers under one arm.

Business did not appear to be very brisk, and he amused himself by studying the faces of the people who passed him, while every now and then he would lustily shout out the names of the evening papers he had on sale.

Presently a carriage drew up to the pavement close by him, and a lady alighted from it.

"*Evening Sun—Evening World?*" queried the urchin, bouncing up to her, and, heedless of everything but to reduce his stock-in-trade, he did not look where he was stepping, so trod directly upon her sweep-
ing, elaborately-trimmed skirt.

She turned upon him with an angry flash in her great black eyes.

"What are you about, you little imp?" she cried, in a tone of passionate disgust, as her glance fell upon the dirty, bare feet that securely pinned her delicate dress to the ground.

"*Sun—World—News?*" he repeated, his curious eyes fastened upon her brilliantly beautiful face, and still intent upon selling a paper.

Without deigning to reply, the woman lifted her daintily-gloved hand and dealt

a resounding slap upon the cheek and ear nearest her.

"Take that, you young vagabond, for your insolence, and get off my dress!" she angrily cried.

The attack was so unexpected that the little fellow staggered backward a few steps, whereupon, released from her uncomfortable predicament, his assailant swept on towards the ladies' entrance to the hotel, without once glancing behind her.

The gamin stood astounded and speechless for a moment, rubbing his smarting cheek.

Then he made a dash after that haughty figure, reaching the entrance before the door had time to fully close after her.

Thrusting his head in at the aperture, and leering viciously into the proud face, he wrathfully told her his mind.

She paid not the slightest heed to him, save to curl her red lips with a slight smile of scorn; but an employé of the house coming forward to drive away the disreputable intruder, he vanished and was around the corner before the man reached the door.

A couple of hours later the same gamin might have been seen industriously overhauling one of the rubbish bins in the rear of the Ellsmere Hotel.

He was evidently hunting for stamps, as he eagerly seized upon every envelope that bore one, while he threw away those that had none. He also carefully preserved every scrap of blank paper that could be detached from old letters.

"Gosh! what's this 'ere?" he muttered, as he came upon a folded, fresh-looking document that rattled noisily in his grasp.

But a look of disappointment overspread his face as, upon examining it, he found both writing and printing on the inside.

"Humph! p'raps the back'll do to practise on," he said, as he refolded it and put it with the promiscuous assortment in his hands.

That paper was Ruth Plympton's precious marriage certificate.

The chambermaid, while putting Ruth's room in order, after the young couple's

A BRAVE GIRL.

departure that morning, had knocked the Bible from the table, when the paper had slipped out upon the floor, where it was afterwards gathered up with others, and thrown out among the rubbish.

Ralph's letter, inquiring for it, was not received until evening, when the room was immediately searched; but the rubbish was not examined until the next morning, when, of course, it was too late to secure the prized document.

The woman who had smitten the little gamin so brutally upon the cheek was Inez Gordon.

She had driven to the hotel to ascertain if Ralph Plympton and his wife had really sailed for Europe.

What connection have these two apparently trifling incidents? and how can they ever be woven into the web, and be made to fit into the plot of our story?

Ah, we shall see!

CHAPTER XI.

A SERPENT APPEARS IN EDEN.

Just one month from the day of their leaving New York, Ralph Plympton and his lovely young wife were delightfully located in one of the finest hotels in Paris.

But the dismay of both can be imagined when, during their first drive on the Boulevard, they suddenly came face to face with Inez Gordon, who was also driving in an elegant turn-out.

"Oh," exclaimed Ruth, in a startled tone, as she involuntarily shrank closer to her husband upon meeting the girl's malignant glance and vicious smile, "that dreadful woman is here in Paris! What shall we do?"

The face of the young man clouded with annoyance, while he utterly ignored the bow of exaggerated politeness which Miss Gordon bestowed upon him as she passed.

"Do?" he repeated. "Why, give her a wide berth and take no notice of her. She is nothing to us. We will simply go on the even tenor of our way, and have just as good a time as we can."

"But, Ralph, I am afraid of her. She actually makes my flesh creep every time

I meet her horribly beautiful eyes," Ruth returned, with a little shiver of repugnance.

"Nonsense, dear! She is not worthy a second thought, so do not bother your pretty head about her any more," Ralph responded, with a note of impatience in his tones; for he was more disturbed than he was willing to acknowledge by the unexpected appearance of Miss Gordon in Paris.

Hitherto they had met with very little to mar their pleasure; indeed, to Ruth, it seemed as if they were leading an ideal life. It was like floating over a calm, sunlit sea, upon which there was not even a ripple to disturb its placid surface.

She had everything heart could desire. Her husband spent money lavishly upon her, satisfied only when she was arrayed in the richest attire, and devoted himself to the pleasant task of making each day more enjoyable than its predecessor.

Ralph, however, had some secret annoyances which he did not confide to his wife. While they had been in London, he had written home, telling his father what he had done; that, though he was sorry to have offended him, he could not live without Ruth. He closed by saying he hoped he would be forgiven, and requested, as a matter of course, that his usual allowance might be sent to his Parisian address.

Mr. Plympton responded, in high dudgeon, that "since he had chosen to disgrace himself and his family by eloping with a beggarly seamstress, he need never look to him again for pecuniary aid; he discarded him utterly; henceforth he would have to depend upon his own private income; and if he did not find that sufficient for his needs, he could go to work to support the girl with whom he had absconded."

It was a coarse, cruel letter, and a great blow to the young man, for, many times before, he had incurred the displeasure of his parents in various ways, but they had always forgiven him, paid his debts, and given him all the money he wanted besides. He had been pampered and indulged from his cradle up to the present

time, and it was no light thing, with his expensive tastes, and a beautiful wife also to provide for, to feel that he must be so financially straitened, especially when he knew that his father had more money than he knew what to do with.

The legacy from which his private income was derived had been left to him by his grandfather, but it was to be held in trust for his heirs, consequently he could not touch the principal, which, doubtless, was a wise provision, or it might have been recklessly squandered long before this.

But Ralph would not trouble Ruth with anything of this; so the letter from his father was destroyed, and, shutting his eyes to the future, he surrendered himself to the pleasures of the present, as if he had not a care in the world.

A few days after their meeting with Miss Gordon, both Ralph and Ruth were greatly disturbed, upon going down to dinner, to find her calmly seated directly opposite their own places at the table.

Ruth had never looked lovelier than on this evening, as, clad in a bewildering costume of light blue silk—one of Worth's unique creations—with delicate, filmy lace just shading her perfect neck and arms, a string of pearls round her milk-white throat, and an ornament of the same precious gems gleaming among the gold of her hair, she swept down the spacious room on her husband's arm and took her seat at the table.

Many admiring glances followed the slight, graceful figure; while not a few marvelled at the bright, joyous face, which seemed to proclaim that the fair young wife had not a care in the world, nor a wish ungratified.

But, suddenly, all the light faded out of that sunny countenance; a frightened look leaped into the wonderful blue eyes, and a shiver swept over her from head to foot, the instant she caught sight of that brilliant mocking face opposite her; when she marked the sinister gleam of those midnight eyes, and the air of malicious triumph with which Miss Gordon leaned forward and coolly greeted them.

"Really, Mr. and Mrs. Plympton, this is such an unexpected pleasure!" she re-

marked. "I congratulate myself upon the happy meeting."

Ralph vouchsafed her only a bow of grave politeness; then bent to study the bill of fare, with Ruth, who did not bestow even a glance of recognition upon the haughty beauty.

They were studiously devoted to each other throughout the meal, which they made as short as possible, and then quietly withdrew to their own apartments.

"This is insufferable!" Ralph exclaimed, the moment they were by themselves. "Who would have believed that she could have the audacity to ferret us out and then follow us here?"

"Let us go away, Ralph," Ruth pleaded, clinging to him with trembling hands. "I cannot stay here and be obliged to meet her day after day. It would be intolerable."

"I know, darling, and I am very sorry; but I have taken the rooms for three months," the young man returned, with a frown of annoyance.

He was greatly disturbed over the matter, and but for the fact that he had been living beyond his means, he would have been glad to forfeit the price of the rooms, give them up and go elsewhere.

But this being impracticable under the circumstances, he finally decided to have their meals served in their own apartments, and thus avoid meeting Miss Gordon at table.

For a few days this arrangement worked very well, and they saw nothing of the woman whom they wished to avoid.

But she was not a person likely to relinquish a purpose when once it was formed. In less than a week she managed to secure the suite of rooms adjoining those occupied by the Plymptons, and thus they could neither pass in nor out without being sure to encounter her in one of the passages.

She was always smiling and gracious, appearing not to observe their coldness towards her, and, judging from her manner, no one could ever have been more innocent of any malicious purpose than she.

"Oh, if we could *only* go away!" cried

Ruthie, in a tone of de-pair, one day, after one of these enforced meetings, when it had seemed as if Inez Gordon had smiled upon her more wickedly than usual.

She was actually growing thin with the constant worry and fear under which she was labouring.

"We will, dear; as soon as our time is up," Ralph assured her.

"Let us go now—this very day," she coaxingly entreated, as she slipped her hand affectionately within his arm and looked appealingly into his eyes. "I would rather live in a garret for a whole year, and be free from the fear of meeting her, than to remain under this roof with her even another week."

"Nonsense, Ruthie; don't be foolish!" the young husband chided, with a touch of irritation. "She cannot do you the slightest harm. Am I not here to protect you?"

But the fair little wife grew more wretched and nervous with every succeeding day.

She would start like a frightened fawn at the sound of a step behind her, or at the opening or shutting of a door. She would spring up in bed at night, from some weird dream, and cry out that she had seemed to be writhing in the coils of some monstrous reptile, with the mocking face and smouldering eyes of Inez Gordon; and one morning, after one of these dreadful attacks of nightmare, she fainted dead away, and was unable to rise during the day.

Ralph was anxious, for she had a raging headache and a high fever; but he was also irritated at what he regarded as childishness, in nursing such an unreasonable fear or whim.

He spent nearly the whole day attending to her needs and trying to soothe her excessive nervousness; and when she finally fell asleep, from sheer exhaustion, he was also wearied out, and concluded that he would go for a stroll in the open air to refresh himself.

His hotel was not far from the Place de la Concorde, and he bent his steps thither. He had been there scarcely ten minutes, when he saw Inez Gordon suddenly appear in the path before him,

approaching him from the opposite direction.

It was no use trying to avoid her; her eyes were upon him, and the next moment she stopped directly before him, and greeted him with smiling cordiality.

"What! alone, Mr. Plympton!" she exclaimed, in playful surprise. "How does it happen that the little wife is not with you this evening?"

"Mrs. Plympton has not been well to-day," Ralph responded, as he respectfully lifted his hat to her.

"Ah! Nothing serious; I trust."

"I hope not," Ralph answered, with cold brevity.

"Is she naturally delicate?" inquired his companion, with a well-assumed air of interest.

"Oh, no; she is usually very well and strong," the young man returned, when, bowing courteously, he made a move to pass on. But Miss Gordon detained him by laying one hand lightly on his arm.

"Mr. Plympton—Ralph," she began, in a tone of simulated timidity that was utterly foreign to her, "pray do not let us cherish a feeling of enmity towards each other. I know that I was guilty of great weakness and indiscretion in using your pretty little wife as I did that day in New York; but you know what a hasty temper I have, and, as usual, I acted upon the impulse of the moment. I could not forget, you know, what happened here last year," she added, with heightened colour, and dropping her lids to hide the flash of fire in her eyes, "and a veritable demon seemed to possess me for the time."

"And made you swear a 'vendetta' against me also," supplemented Ralph, with a dash of scorn in his tones.

She darted a swift, snake-like glance at him; then she laughed musically.

"Oh, did you really attach any importance to that?" she exclaimed, in a tone of amused surprise. "It was only a flash of the same old temper, and burned itself out with the impulse that prompted it. I am sorry for it now, and have been wanting to tell you so ever since I came here; but you have so persistently avoided me, I have had no opportunity.

Truly, Ralph, I want to be your friend, if you will let me. I know that I was more to blame than you for what occurred at Ver-a-illes; and now that I have humbled myself enough to confess it, we will never speak or think of it again. Can't you persuade that dainty wife of yours to forgive me also, and let me come and give her a little friendly care while she is ill? It is so forlorn to be sick in a hotel, to say nothing about being in a strange country," she concluded, with a most friendly air.

Ralph Plympton looked steadily into her eyes a moment before replying.

Somehow he distrusted her, in spite of her confession and assurance of goodwill, and his judgment warned him to bid her a courteous good day, and escape from her magnetic presence with all possible speed.

But "he who hesitates is lost" is an o'er true maxim, and so Ralph's vacillating nature again led him to commit a great blunder that was destined to cost him much.

"Are you really honest, Inez, in what you have said?" he inquired, at last.

The woman ground the heel of her small boot viciously into the gravelled path at this evidence of his distrust of her. But, fortunately for her purpose, he could not see the movement, and, having made a safety-valve of her inoffensive number threes, she recovered her self-control, which for the moment had nearly forsaken her.

"Well, *mon ami*, that is rather poor encouragement—a doubtful incentive to what I had flattered myself was a very praiseworthy effort on my part," she retorted, laughing, but with a strangely dazzling gleam in her eyes.

"I beg your pardon, if I have wronged you," returned Ralph, now flushing in turn; "but, knowing your temperament as I do, I could scarcely credit my own hearing."

"I own that is not surprising; but you are pardoned," the crafty girl responded, with one of her most alluring smiles.

"And now"—extending her hand to him—"shall we bury the hatchet, and be friends?"

What was there about her that swayed him so, in spite of the secret feeling of repulsion that still warned him not to trust her?

He knew that he had no right to overlook the insult that she had offered Ruth—that he was indirectly wronging his wife in yielding himself again to her baneful influence; and yet, impelled by some power stronger than his own will, he mechanically took the hand she offered him, thus virtually sealing the fatal compact of friendship between them.

CHAPTER XII.

INCONSTANCY.

Once having committed himself, it was comparatively easy for Ralph to "go the whole figure;" and so, led on by adroit changes in the conversation, he was decoyed into spending half an hour longer with his companion, promenading the avenues of the Place de la Concorde, and when he finally returned to the hotel, he bore in his hands a wealth of exquisite roses as a peace-offering to his wife.

"Oh, how perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Ruth, who had but just awakened, and who became conscious of the delicious perfume the moment he entered the room, while her heavy eyes brightened into positive delight as they rested upon the mass of rich blooms.

"They are for you, darling," said her husband, laying them upon the pillow beside her; but he dared not tell her that Inez Gordon had sent them, for he well knew that they would lose all their charm for her, and she would scorn the gift.

The presentation had happened thus: As they were passing a florist's on their way back to the hotel, Inez had remarked, "Come in here a moment; I want some flowers;" and before he fairly comprehended her purpose, she had spent thirty francs, and put the roses into his hands.

"Take them home to her," she said, smiling brightly up into his face; "they are my peace-offering, but do not tell her just yet that I sent them; let her learn to like me by degrees."

Thus she cunningly established a little

secret between them to help rivet more firmly the chains that she was forging about him. He would have been glad to refuse the offering, but he could not do so without appearing rude, and, besides, the magic spell of her beauty and her power was still strong upon him. He would even have been glad of a chance to throw the flowers away, for he shrank from carrying them to Ruth, knowing how exceedingly repulsive to her was Inez Gordon's personality. But he had no opportunity to dispose of them, for the wily woman accompanied him directly upstairs, and bade him a cordial good-bye at the door of his own room, which he felt obliged to enter as she turned to hers.

Ruth seemed refreshed by her nap, and really improved; even sitting up to fondle and admire her flowers, which he was "so kind and thoughtful to bring to her," while he felt like a guilty wretch in view of the deception he was practising upon her, yet lacking the moral courage to confess it.

The next morning Ruth was much better, and after they had breakfasted she suddenly remarked:

"Ralph, we ought to go to the St. Antoine Hospital and inquire for Mr. Meredith. What will he think of us for having neglected him so long? Suppose we go this very day?"

Ralph agreed to this proposition, and a little later, having ordered a carriage, they drove to the institution to ascertain how their friend was prospering.

"Yea," they were informed upon being admitted to the hospital, "Monsieur Meredith was a patient there; the operation had been performed about two weeks previous, and he had been very ill since; he was not yet able to see any visitors."

"But he will be soon, will he not?" Ruth anxiously questioned.

"That we do not know, madam. No one can tell," said the attendant, looking grave. "Monsieur is critically ill—it is not sure that he will recover," he concluded, with some reluctance.

"Oh," breathed the young wife, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "was not the operation successful?"

"That also is uncertain as yet, madam," was the evasive reply.

So all they could do was to leave their cards, with a box of hyacinths that Ruth had brought for him, and go their way, saddened by the discouraging report they had received.

"I am afraid he will die," murmured Ruth, suppressing a sob, as they were going down the steps of the stately building, "and if he does, the world will lose a grand and noble man."

"Why, Ruthie dear," Ralph lightly responded, as he bent a smiling look upon her sad face, "I am almost inclined to be jealous of Basil Meredith. You must have grown very fond of him to grieve like this on his account."

"You need never be jealous of anybody, Ralph," she answered, looking gravely up into his eyes, with the frank, innocent expression of a child, "for I am your wife, and I could never be unfaithful to my vows to you, in thought or deed; but I did like Mr. Meredith very much; he was so strong, so true, so brave and manly. And yet, in many respects, he was as gentle and tender as a woman."

"Don't speak of him, dear, in the past tense," said Ralph, with a slight shrug of his shoulders; "he isn't out of the world yet, and I don't feel that he is going to die, either. He is, indeed, a fine fellow, but it is a great pity that he is such a cripple, for, of course, even if he should get about again, he'd have rather a lonely life of it, as it isn't likely that any woman—his equal—would want to marry such a misshapen object."

Ruth flushed indignantly at this remark.

"I don't see why not," she said, spiritedly. "I think any woman might be proud to have such a man sue for her hand, in spite of his misfortune."

She was thinking of the conversation that she had once had with Basil Meredith himself upon this very question. But she had never repeated it to Ralph, because she had regarded it as strictly confidential.

Her husband now turned a look of astonishment upon her.

"Why, Ruth, do you mean to say that

you could ever marry a cripple like Basil Meredith, *under any circumstances?*" he questioned.

"Yes, indeed, if I loved him, and be proud of him, too," she replied, with an earnestness that proved her sincerity.

"Then, if anything should happen to me, and I should become a hunchback, or terribly disfigured in some way, you would not recoil from me?" he persisted, as he assisted her into their carriage.

"No, Ralph, never," she unhesitatingly returned, "if, morally, you were as good and true as I believe you are now. It is the *soul*, the *mind*, which has power to command love, respect, reverence; not this garment of flesh which has no enduring entity," she concluded, a look of unusual thoughtfulness on her young face.

"Good gracious, Ruth!" exclaimed Ralph, laughing. "I had no idea that you were such a philosopher; such analyses are too profound for me; but 'this garment of flesh,' as you term it, is very real and tangible to me just now; and"—enfolding her in a fond, eager embrace—"this lovely form and charming face are a perfect and real delight to me."

"But they would not be if I lay cold and inanimate before you," she quickly responded.

"Oh, horrors! no. Pray, let us drop this uncanny subject at once," said the young man, with a shiver of repulsion.

"Certainly, if you wish; I only spoke of this to prove to you that the child which we both have recognized in Mr. Meredith is almost wholly independent of his body. Isaac Watts has aptly said:

"I must be measured by my soul;

The mind's the standard of the man."

Ralph's face clouded as she repeated these forcible maxims, and, much against his will, he found himself wondering what his moral stature would be if he were measured by his soul.

But the subject was dropped and never referred to again, though there came a time later on when the memory of it caused him the bitterest humiliation and pain.

They sent to inquire for Mr. Meredith almost every day, but he continued very

ill, for a long time fluctuating between life and death, until they began to fear that they would never see him again.

Ruth also had many bad days during the next few weeks, and was often confined to her room, while it became a common occurrence, upon such occasions, for Ralph and Miss Gordon to walk or ride together, and thus they grew to be upon very friendly terms once more.

One day they were absent much longer than usual, and Ruth, after a long rest, feeling stronger than for several days, dressed herself for the street, thinking she would take a stroll in the park before dinner, for a feeling of loneliness was upon her.

She had just descended to the court of the hotel, and was upon the point of turning into the street, when she came face to face with her recreant husband and the woman whom her soul loathed.

They were laughing and chatting together with the utmost freedom and friendliness.

Ruth stopped amazed, and glanced curiously from one to the other, a terrible fear smiting her heart.

Ralph flushed guiltily; but Miss Gordon, with her halcyon *sang froid*, was equal to the emergency.

"Ah, Mrs. Plympton!" she exclaimed, with a gracious air and smile. "I had just met your husband, and was inquiring for you. Allow me to say"—with a glance at the young wife's crimson cheeks—"that you do not look much like the invalid he has represented you. I congratulate you."

Ruth bowed slightly, with grave politeness, without replying; then turning to Ralph, she remarked:

"I was going for a turn in the park. Will you come with me?"

He lifted his hat to Inez, then gave his arm to his wife, to comply with her request, although he was far from feeling comfortable.

"Why didn't you speak to Miss Gordon?" he inquired, in a tone of annoyance. "I'm sure she was very polite and kind to inquire after you."

Ruth turned a surprised face upon him.

"I want nothing to do with her; as I

have told you before, it makes my flesh creep to look into her eyes. She is a heartless, a wicked woman," she replied, with more spirit than Ralph had ever seen her betray.

"I am afraid you are becoming morbid where she is concerned, dear," he replied. "It is unjust to cherish such a feeling of repulsion towards any one."

The young wife was pale enough now to warrant any one in representing her an invalid, and the look of pain about her sweet mouth was extremely pathetic.

She made no direct reply to Ralph's remarks; but, shivering slightly, said she was cold and tired, and did not care to walk any farther, and would go back to the hotel.

The next day she was prostrated again, when Ralph and Miss Gordon improved the opportunity to make a trip to Buttes Chamont.

Upon their return they dined together, and in the evening attended the opera.

Ruth had been anticipating this treat for a long time; but now the time had come, she could not raise her head from her pillow. Nevertheless, she generously told her husband that he need not miss it because she was ill.

"I cannot bear to go without you, Ruth," he said, feeling immediately conscience-smitten over leaving her so much alone. "Can't you get up strength enough to come with me? I have the tickets, you know."

"No, I am too weak," she answered, wearily.

"Well, then," he returned, with some reluctance, "I will dispose of the tickets and remain with you."

"Indeed you shall not do that," she objected. "Dispose of one, if you like, but use the other yourself."

The way he disposed of Ruth's ticket was by asking Inez Gordon to accompany him to hear "Lohengrin," and thus they finished the day as they had begun it—in each other's society.

During the next few days Ruth became so much worse that a nurse was secured to attend her; and so, feeling less compunction about leaving her, and being heartily tired of the depressing influences

of a sick-room, Ralph spent most of his time with the siren who was slowly but surely leading him to destruction.

The three months for which he had taken his rooms expired about this time; but when Ruth mentioned it, and begged him to make the promised change, he put her off by saying that the physician would not allow her to be moved while she was so ill; and so the wretched days and weeks dragged on for three months longer—the young wife suffering mentally as well as physically, for she could not help feeling the neglect of her husband and attributing it to the right cause.

Then one day there came a cable message, telling Ralph that his mother was dead. A stroke of apoplexy had resulted fatally in about eight hours, during which she had not known one conscious moment.

The shock was a terrible one to the young man, for he had always been fond and proud of his handsome mother. For a time he was almost crushed by the blow, especially as she had died at enmity with him.

But it was to Inez Gordon that he went for consolation, rather than to his wife, in this affliction; and she, making the utmost of her opportunity, wove her spells and tightened her coils more securely about him, until he was content only when in her presence, becoming moody, silent, and irritable when away from her.

Ruth, realizing something of this, although she did not suspect the extent to which their intimacy had developed, made an effort to conquer the weakness that rendered her so wretched.

She proposed that they go away—it now being the last of April—to some quiet place in the country for the next few weeks; but Ralph would not consent to such an arrangement, saying that he should stagnate out of Paris, especially if he was cooped up in a country house with no company or modern conveniences.

Finding that he would not yield to her in this, and feeling that a change of some kind must be made, Ruth insisted that she should never get well so long as she

remained in a hotel, and he finally consented to take a small furnished house in the city if he could find one to his mind, and for a time make a home for themselves.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SCHEMING WOMAN'S TRIUMPH.

Ruth's determination to make a change only served to give Inez Gordon a better opportunity to further her own ends; for, since Ruth could not go house-hunting, and Ralph did not like to assume the responsibility alone, she offered her services in assisting to get the young couple settled.

They were a week finding what they wanted in the way of a house, and several days longer in putting it in order, before the invalid was moved into it; but during this time their relations had assumed a confidential character that was suggestive of sentiments of a tenderer nature than mere friendliness.

Inez was always so bright and entertaining, so full of energy and concern in whatever interested Ralph, perfectly and tastefully dressed upon all occasions, that the young husband often found himself making invidious comparisons that reflected upon the pale, pain-drawn face that always greeted him from the pillow upon his return to his darkened, gloomy chamber, while the pathetic voice and weary, listless manner of his girl-wife depressed and irritated him almost beyond endurance; the more so, because he was uncomfortably conscious that he was proving recreant to duty and his marriage vows.

Besides this, he was financially embarrassed. He was continually harassed by the presentation of bills which he could not meet; while his current expenses were greatly increased by the doctor's and nurse's bills, disagreeable adjuncts with which, hitherto, he had had no experience, all such difficulties having been, heretofore, exorcised by the privilege of dipping deep into his father's plethoric purse. It will, therefore, be understood that his indolent, easy-loving nature chafed and rebelled against the

perplexing cares and annoyances that at present assailed him.

At last the house was ready to receive them. It was a small one—for Ruth had pleaded for something "cosy and home-like"—but a gem of its kind, and the young wife seemed to be supremely happy and content when they took possession of it.

She brightened so vividly and really seemed so much improved that Ralph was glad that he had heeded her wishes, even though their removal from the hotel had served to interrupt his intimacy with Miss Gordon.

But Ruth was still confined within doors, and could not go about with him, or even bear the excitement of company; thus he was thrown much upon his own resources for entertainment, and, being of a restless nature, he soon grew weary of the restraint, and, after wandering aimlessly about the house and grounds for a day or two, he finally disappeared, and involuntarily turned his steps towards his old familiar quarters, to seek more congenial companionship.

At the entrance to the hotel he came upon Inez, looking brilliantly beautiful in a ravishing costume, and just on the point of entering her carriage, to go for her afternoon drive on the boulevard.

A flash of triumph leaped into her eyes as she caught sight of her victim; then her face broke into smiles of welcome; and, stretching out both hands to him, she exclaimed in a delighted tone:

"Oh, how glad I am to see you! It seems an age since you went away; and I was just bemoaning the cruel fate that had condemned me to a solitary drive. But you will come with me now, will you not? You look as if you needed a ride, or *something*, to cheer you up a bit. Is the little wife worse again?"

"No, not worse, but still too much of an invalid to care very much for company, poor child!" he returned, with a slight twinge of conscience, as he thought of that same "poor child" in her uncomplaining loneliness, whom he was so selfishly neglecting.

"Well, of course, I am sorry for you both," Miss Gordon remarked, but look-

ing far from inconsolable over the situation. "But, since you have provided her with a competent nurse, and are sure she will be well cared for, there is no reason for making yourself miserable over what you cannot remedy. So come and let us try to exorcise the doleful spirit that makes you look like a martyr just ready for the sacrificial stake."

Such remarks as these certainly tended to impress the sense of personal injury more strongly upon the young man's mind—as she intended they should—and to make him more restive under the bonds that united him to an invalid wife.

The invitation to drive was, therefore, too tempting to resist, and he was soon bowling along the smooth white roads, outside of Paris, ignoring all responsibilities and forgetting all annoyances in the fascinating presence of the serpent who had deliberately planned to poison the atmosphere of his Eden and wreck his happiness and that of the fair woman whom he had chosen for his wife.

Ruth began to improve, slowly but steadily, from the day of her removal from the hotel, until, at length, she was able to drive out for a little while every day.

It was fortunate for her peace of mind, however, that she was ignorant of the fact that she was indebted for this pleasure to Inez Gordon, who added to the many obligations already conferred upon him by persuading Ralph to make use of her elegant turn-out, claiming that her horses needed more exercise than she cared to give them; while he was thus saved the expense of hiring a carriage for his wife's use.

But as Ruth grew stronger, and began to interest herself in the affairs of the world, she could not fail to perceive that her husband was greatly changed.

• If she asked him to remain and read to her while she sewed, as he had been accustomed to do before her illness, he never failed to have an appointment at "the club." If she wanted him to accompany her during her drive, he had "letters to write for the next mail," or some equally insufficient reason, though she was sure to find him absent upon her

return; while he could not remain in her presence for even an hour without becoming strangely uneasy and absent-minded.

She was also quick to discern certain marks of dissipation that were becoming but too plainly stamped upon his face, and betrayed themselves in his trembling hands, bloodshot eyes, and irritable disposition, upon presenting himself before her in the morning, after some of his orgies with the fast set with which he mingled.

One day she asked if he had recently inquired how it fared with Mr. Meredith, from whom they had not heard for several weeks.

"No," he curtly replied; "we've had too much sickness of our own to contend with for me to concern myself about other invalids."

Ruth flushed a pained crimson at the thoughtless, if not unfeeling, response.

But, quietly ignoring it, she asked him if he would go with her that afternoon to call upon their friend, if he should be able to see them; if not, to leave some message to show that they had not forgotten him.

"No, I can't," Ralph answered, with a frown, but also with a flush of guilt, for he had pledged himself to drive out to a certain castle on the Seine—where there was to be a grand fête—with Inez Gordon as his companion. "But, Ruth, you can go if you like."

"What, alone! Would it be proper, Ralph?" she questioned, with surprise.

"Proper!" he repeated, smiling at her modesty. "Why, yes; you are a married woman, and can go anywhere you choose. Matrons, you know, are privileged characters in Paris."

"But I—I should feel more comfortable if you accompanied me, Ralph," she wistfully returned.

"I am sorry, dear, to disappoint you; but I have made an engagement with Russell to go out of town this afternoon," he objected, with some coldness.

"Russell" was an American, and a man of somewhat "rapid" tendencies, whom they had met since coming to Paris, and it was true, to a certain extent,

that Ralph had an engagement to go out of town with him; for that gentleman was to take a companion of his own choosing, and the quartette were to go in one carriage to the fête and "have a gay time."

"I'll order a carriage for any hour you say," he obligingly added, "and you can go to the hospital to see Meredith, and take my compliments and regrets along with you."

"Will you go to-morrow, if I wait?" Ruth asked, after a moment of thought.

It would have been far better for him if he had acceded to this request, had he but realized it; but he answered, with a shrug of impatience:

"Oh, I don't want to, Ruthie, and I wonder how you can make up your mind to go, either; you've been shut up so long yourself in a sick-room, and the sight of an invalid is so depressing."

Again the young wife flushed, and her beautiful eyes clouded with a sense of pain as she thought that perhaps the sad change that had been coming over Ralph was owing to the depressing influence of her own long illness.

"Very well," she said, with a little sigh of regret. "You may order a carriage for me, and I will go by myself this afternoon. I feel that we really owe Mr. Meredith the courtesy of showing some friendly interest in him."

So directly after lunch she drove out to the St. Antoine Hospital, taking with her a dainty basket of pansies to cheer the sick man, if, indeed, she should be so fortunate as to see him.

Not that she wished him to be still a patient in the institution, but she almost feared that, having been so long neglected by them, even if he had been discharged from the hospital, he might feel sensitive about seeking them out.

Upon her arrival she was told that Mr. Meredith was still a patient there, but was now rapidly convalescing.

"Would madam like to see him?" the attendant courteously inquired.

Ruth flushed at the question. For some inexplicable reason she shrank from paying Basil Meredith a visit alone.

"This is the regular visiting day," the

man continued, as he observed her hesitation, "and monsieur would be delighted to see a friend from his own country. It would, indeed, be a favour, if madam is not pressed for time, for he has been much depressed of late."

Ruth hesitated no longer; for—judging from her own recent experience—she could well understand how lonely and heart-sick the man must be, to have been ill so many months in a strange land, and without a single friend to manifest an interest in him.

So, throwing all her sensitive scruples to the wind, she responded:

"Yes, I shall be glad to see him, if you will first ascertain that the visit will be agreeable to him."

The man immediately despatched some one to Mr. Meredith's room with the message, together with the basket of pansies which Ruth gave him, and to which she had attached her card.

The boy soon returned, and said he was to conduct the lady at once to the gentleman. A few moments later Ruth stood again in Basil Meredith's presence.

Both were mutually shocked at the change that they discerned in each other; but Ruth was very glad that she had come, for the wan face of her friend and his heart-hungry eyes lighted with such genuine pleasure, as he eagerly clasped her hand, that she was deeply moved, and reproached herself for not having insisted upon Ralph visiting him during his illness.

They spent a pleasant half-hour together, comparing notes, each seeking to encourage the other, and conversing upon congenial subjects.

He touched as lightly as possible upon his own bitter experience during the last seven months.

The operation had been successful only in relieving him entirely from his pain, "which was a great pain," he said, with an effort to smile cheerfully that almost made his companion weep.

"I shall never be anything but a cripple, but my general health is improving rapidly every day, and I shall soon be out again," he told her; then changed the topic, and did not refer to himself again during her visit.

But he looked like a different man when she arose to go. The sadness had all faded out of his face; his eyes were bright, his manner animated, and he even jestingly told her that he should expect her to repeat her call very shortly.

She promised that she would do so within a few days; then she went away, more deeply impressed than ever with the strong, beautiful character of Basil Meredith.

She was feeling unusually well; the day was perfect, the atmosphere mild and balmy, and she told her coachman that he might drive her out for a couple of miles on the road to Versailles, for she longed inexpressibly for a breath of country air.

She enjoyed the ride immensely; and if she had had a companion, she would have been glad to extend her trip still further.

"Oh, if I could have but one glimpse of those dear old green hills of Vermont!" she sighed, a strange feeling of loneliness and homesickness suddenly oppressing her.

But this mood was soon superseded by emotions of an entirely different nature.

Her driver had scarcely turned cityward again, when her attention was attracted by a hilarious party who were approaching her, and who evidently were bent upon an afternoon of pleasure, judging by their festive appearance.

Nearer and nearer they came, until, as the carriages were passing each other, Ruth Plympton looked curiously up and straight into her husband's face!

He was sitting upon the back seat of the *tarouche*—she could not see the couple in front—and beside him, looking for all the world as if she, and she only, had the right to be there, was Inez Gordon!

The scheming woman had not dreamed of having such an opportunity as this to triumph over her rival; but since the fates had willed it so, she gloated over it none the less.

The start and muttered oath of her companion caused her to pause in the jest she was perpetrating, and glance up just in time to observe the white, shocked face of the wretched young wife, to whom

she audaciously nodded, a smile of sinister and malignant satisfaction wreathing her red lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

Ruth was so dazed, so paralyzed by what she had seen, that it was some moments after the carriage passed before she could move; she was hardly able to breathe, so utterly confounded was she by what had occurred.

Now she began to understand the cause of the marked change in her husband within the last few months.

She also realized that Inez Gordon had been chiefly and deliberately to blame for it; she knew, instinctively, that the unprincipled, unforgiving woman had followed them to Paris with a settled purpose to ruin their happiness.

"Oh, how *could* he?—how could he ever give her one friendly thought, after her treatment of me in New York?" she cried, in bitter anguish of spirit, when, having reached home, she shut herself in her room and tried to calmly think over what had happened.

Her love for and confidence in her husband had received such a shock that it seemed as if she could never recover from it.

She was utterly prostrated for the time by the appalling situation and a sickening fear for what the future might hold in store. Her head ached, her heart seemed utterly crushed, and she was in a raging fever.

But there were depths in the young wife's nature that had never yet been sounded, as she was destined to learn in more ways than one, and the time had come to begin to take their measure.

And so, with rare resolution, she crushed her grief back into her heart, carefully effacing all traces of it from her face, and, as the afternoon drew towards its close, dressed herself with more care than she had expended at any time since her illness.

She had determined not to meet Ralph, upon his return, with tears and reproaches, with flushed cheeks, swollen lids, and dis-

ordered attire; she would, instead, look her brightest and sweetest, and strive by every art in her power to regain the ground she had lost, even though she had lost it through no fault of her own.

The dinner hour came and went, and her husband did not make his appearance.

The long, lonely hours of the evening dragged slowly on, until midnight hammered forth its weird strokes from a neighbouring church steeple; yet the recreant pleasure-seeker came not; and, finally worn out with watching and grief, the neglected wife fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

It was late the next morning when she awoke, only to find that Ralph was still absent, and then she became a prey to anxious fears for his safety, mingled with indignation that he should leave her there alone, when she was still far from well, to suffer such harrowing suspense.

Another wretched day and night passed, when, late on the third afternoon, he returned, and came staggering into the presence of his wife in a maudlin state of intoxication.

The young wife seemed turning to stone as she arose to greet him; while she grew sick and faint upon catching the fumes of his breath when he bent forward as if to kiss her.

She drew back with an involuntary gesture of disgust. How did she know but that his hot lips still bore the caresses from those of another?

"Ralph, you are not yourself," she said, with quiet dignity, and an unaccustomed note of authority in her tone. "You had best go to your room and rest."

She swung open the door as she spoke. His brain was too muddled to enable him to think for himself or resist her, and he staggered into the room, where, throwing himself upon his bed, dressed as he was, he fell at once into a drunken stupor.

Scorn, disgust, rebellion, grief, and despair, each struggled for mastery in Ruth's wounded heart; and this state of mind was in nowise mitigated when, having slept off his intoxication, Ralph came to himself and remained silent and sullen, refusing to explain anything, or to listen to a word of remonstrance from her.

He was cross, irritable, almost brutal in his manner towards her; the goadings of conscience made him angry rather than humble, while a sulky pride sealed his lips to all acknowledgment.

A week later he again suddenly absented himself from home, whereupon Ruth became desperate and resolved to know if Inez Gordon were again his companion. She went to her hotel and boldly inquired for the girl. She was told that Miss Gordon was out of town for a few days.

"Did she leave no address? Where will a letter reach her?" Ruth shrewdly inquired.

"Yes, there was an address to which her own letters were to be forwarded," the chief clerk replied, and, consulting his books, wrote it for her.

Ruth clutched the paper with trembling fingers; but a blur came before her eyes, and she was unable to read what was written on it until she was once more in the open air, which served to revive her.

Then she read, "Hôtel Despard, Rue de la Place Royale, Rouen."

Ah, heaven! She knew now just what to expect.

She had read, only that morning, that the Grand Opera was to be at Rouen for a week, and she believed that Ralph and Inez Gordon had gone thither to attend it.

Both were passionately fond of music and the stage; both were absent, and Ruth instinctively felt that they were together.

A sudden resolution took possession of her.

"I, too, will go to Rouen," she said, her blue eyes blazing, her cheeks a scarlet flame from outraged feeling.

She hastened home, hurriedly packed a few necessary articles into a travelling-bag, told her servants that she was going out of town for a day or two, to join her husband, and then drove to the station just in time to catch the westward express.

She was half frightened at what she had done, when she found herself alone in the train, for she had never travelled by herself since she made that memorable journey from Vermont to New York.

"But a married woman can go anywhere," she told herself, with exceeding bitterness, as she recalled her husband's words, when she had questioned the propriety of visiting Basil Meredith alone in the St. Antoine Hospital.

"A married woman!" she repeated, with white, quivering lips; "less than a year wedded, and my heart breaking from neglect that is almost desertion."

She reached Rouen just at nightfall, and, as she drove from the station to the Hôtel Despard, she saw, on every hand, the gaudy placards announcing the celebrated talent that was to appear in the Grand Opera that evening.

Arriving at her destination, she registered, in a disguised hand, as Mrs. Reynolds, and then glanced rapidly over the names recorded on the last two pages.

Yes, there was the signature she sought, written in a plain, flowing hand:

"Madame Gordon, Paris."

"Ah!" she thought, with curling lips, "so she figures under the title of madame!"

But, though she searched every line carefully, she could not find the name of her husband, and a shock of mingled relief and dismay went tingling along her nerves in view of the fact. Perhaps Ralph had not come to Rouen with Inez, after all! He might, indeed, even now, be at home, and wondering over her own absence!

Still her suspicions were not wholly allayed, although it was evident, if he was in the city, that he had had the prudence not to take a room in the same house with the woman she abhorred.

However, she had made her plunge; she could not return to Paris that night, even had she so desired, and she resolved to satisfy herself, before she went home, that Ralph either was or was not the companion of Miss Gordon.

She asked for opera tickets, and selected a seat in the first balcony, where she could have a good opportunity to overlook the audience below and the occupants of the proscenium boxes.

When the hour for the evening's entertainment drew near, she took a carriage to the Opera House, where she was

ushered to her seat, and with the aid of a powerful glass began to search for those two familiar faces.

Just as the signal was given for the rising of the curtain, her heart leaped into her throat as she saw her husband and Inez Gordon take their seats in the lower box on the right of the stage, where the girl arranged the draperies to conceal herself somewhat from observation.

For a moment the outraged wife became so excited it seemed as if she must go straight down to that box and denounce them both, then and there, for their brazen effrontery.

But, of course, she could not make a scene in public, and so was obliged to control her impulses and bide her time.

It was torture to her, however, to be obliged to sit there for three long hours, scarcely glancing at the stage; hearing nothing, seeing nothing but those partially concealed figures below her.

Once or twice she caught a glimpse of a slender, white, jewelled hand as it swayed a costly fan to and fro; and, once, she saw the girl, with her brilliant, smiling face, lean forward and sweep the house with curious, eager eyes.

Ruth drew her thickly-spotted veil more closely over her face and shrank behind a post, near which she was sitting, as she observed this movement; while she was thankful that Ralph remained out of sight, else she felt that she must have screamed from pain and the nervous excitement that was growing more and more unbearable every moment.

The last act was not half over when she made her way quietly from the house and returned to the hotel. Immediately upon reaching her room she rang for a chambermaid. When the girl appeared, she dropped a franc into her hand and remarked:

"I find that I have an acquaintance stopping in this hotel. Can you ascertain where her room is? Her name is Madame Gordon."

The maid immediately replied that Madame Gordon's rooms were upon that same floor—that she occupied the corner suite on the left; nine was the number.

Ruth was greatly relieved when she

learned this, for the girl's proximity would make her task so much the easier.

Dismissing the servant, she sat down to await the return of the tenants, her light out and her door slightly ajar, to enable her to see and hear them, when one or both should come.

More than an hour passed before her wretched vigil was at an end.

"Of course they are having a dainty supper somewhere," Ruth thought, with a bitter pang at her heart, as she sat there in the darkness, alone, every nerve quivering with pain and indignation.

But at last she caught the sound of Inez Gordon's resonant voice and laugh in the corridor, then a subdued remark, in reply from Ralph, while as they passed her door the girl's silken robes trailed against it, pushing it still farther open.

The insulted wife scarcely breathed, but her small, milk-white teeth were tightly clinched in mortal pain, and, in her heart, at the moment, she felt as if she hated them both with undying hatred.

She heard them enter the "corner suite" and shut the door.

Not many minutes after a servant passed her room bearing a tray, upon which there were a couple of glasses and a bottle of wine.

He knocked at the "corner suite."

The door was opened by some one inside, when the man entered, deposited his tray, and then retired; but Ruth, who was listening with strained ears and bated breath, was sure that the door was not locked after him, a circumstance that would contribute much towards the success of her plan.

She waited until the servant was well out of the way, then she glided noiselessly out into the corridor, and advanced to the corner room.

She stood there listening for a moment or two; but she could hear only low, muffled tones that told her nothing.

Softly she grasped the handle of the door and turned it, her heart bounding into her throat as she found that it yielded—that her way was clear.

The next moment she boldly pushed the door open, and, entering the room with noiseless steps, closed it after her.

CHAPTER XV.

"LOVE YOU? I DO NOT EVEN RESPECT YOU!"

The sight that met the young wife's eyes as she so silently entered that room was stamped upon her memory for all time.

Inez Gordon was seated upon one end of a low couch, Ralph being stretched at full length upon the rest of it, his head resting upon the lap of the treacherous woman, while her white, jewelled fingers toyed with the waving masses of his rich brown hair.

Beside them, upon a small table, were the glasses and wine which the servant had but a few moments before brought them, and a great shade to a tall lamp shed a subdued but rose-hued light over everything in the room.

The young man's laughing eyes were raised, with a look of admiration, to the brilliant face bending over him; and Ruth wondered, as she looked upon the girl, what he could see to admire in her; for, in spite of regularity of features and rich, vivid colouring, there was a fiery, serpent-like gleam in those midnight eyes, a cruel smile ever lurking among the curves of that perfect mouth, that should have betrayed her nature and warned the most reckless of her treachery.

She had once seen, when a child, a swaying, undulating snake charm a pretty bird, and she could think of nothing now but the useless fluttering and pathetic cries of the tiny songster as it was lured to certain destruction, the only difference being that it had been conscious of its danger, while Ralph was either ignorant or indifferent to that which menaced him.

When she closed the door after her, the bolt had clicked slightly as it slipped into its socket. The sound attracted the attention of the other occupants, and they turned, involuntarily, to ascertain what had caused it.

Instantly the guilty couple sprang to their feet, a low, heartless laugh breaking from Inez Gordon's lips as her glance fell upon the fair little wife standing so haughtily erect, her face looking like

some beautiful medallion carved in marble.

"Good heavens, Ruth!" Ralph ejaculated, his own face scarcely less white. "Where on earth do you come from?"

She had planned how she would denounce them both, with scornful, seathing words that should make them cower and shrink before her; but, now, in this supreme moment, she found herself utterly dumb before them.

She could not have spoken to save her life; but that white, agonized face and the pathetic look in her large blue eyes pierced the faithless man like a poisoned arrow.

"Confound it! can't you answer? What does this mean?" he cried, beginning to recover himself, and growing restive under her steadfast gaze, while, like most cowards, he took refuge behind anger.

Even then she did not open her lips; with her eyes still on his face, she put her hand behind her, quietly reopened the door, and glided back into the hall, when—her strength rapidly failing her—she swiftly sped to her own room, and had locked herself in before Ralph could break the spell that bound him and spring after her.

Then he dashed wildly into the corridor in pursuit of her; but, seeing nothing of her, he hurried down the stairs, thinking to overtake her before she could leave the house.

He met a servant just coming up.

"Did a lady pass this way just now?" he inquired, in a husky tone.

"No, monsieur; no lady has come down; nearly every one has retired."

"It is very strange!" muttered the young man; and he shivered slightly as a sudden fear assailed him.

He had heard that the apparition of people who were dying sometimes appeared as a warning to their friends, and Ruth had come and gone so silently and suddenly it had seemed scarcely more than a vision.

Could it be possible that she was ill again—perhaps dying—and he had just seen her spirit?

He was not inclined to be supersti-

tious; but he knew that his young wife was nearing a critical time, and it might be that his recent neglect, together with the anxiety and suspense she had suffered, had prematurely prostrated her and brought her to death's door.

He went slowly back upstairs, a cold sweat breaking out all over him, a terrible sense of guilt and fear at his heart.

"Well?" remarked Miss Gordon, inquiringly, as he re-entered her presence.

"I could not find her—no woman has passed out of the house. Inez, I am half inclined to think that it wasn't Ruth at all, but an ominous vision," the young man responded, with dry lips.

"Nonsense! What an absurd notion!" contemptuously retorted his companion. "We both saw Ruth Plympton in the flesh; she has followed us here, though how she could have obtained a clue to our whereabouts is more than I can understand. Look there!" she added, pointing to some object upon the floor at his feet; "that proves that we have just seen something more substantial than an intangible shape."

Ralph glanced down, and saw a tiny brown glove lying on the carpet by the door. He picked it up, and the faint odour of rose that greeted his nostrils would have proved to whom it belonged, even if he had not recognized it by the gold buttons at the wrist.

"Yes, she has been here," he observed, but with a very blank face; "but how on earth could she disappear so quickly after leaving the room?"

"Easily enough," returned Miss Gordon, with an indifferent yawn. "Doubtless she is stopping in the hotel, and has taken a room near these. Probably, if you choose to look, you will find her name on the register below."

"I will go and see," he answered; "and as it is so late, I will not come up again, unless you feel anxious to know whether Ruth is here."

"Mercy! no; her movements are not of the least consequence to me," Inez retorted, with a short laugh, that was like the sting of a lash across his face. "But won't you have a glass of wine before you

go?" she added, pouring out some of the amber liquid.

"No," he curtly replied, with a gesture of repugnance.

"Very well; I suppose I shall see you at breakfast—unless," she added, sharply searching his frowning face, "you show the white feather, and return to Paris by the morning express, to appease the wrath of your doll-faced divinity."

Ralph coloured angrily at her sarcastic tone.

"No," he said, moodily, "we will have our lark out, since we have dared so much; we will remain through the season. We can't afford to sacrifice our opera tickets, you know."

"All right. Good night, then, and pleasant dreams," replied the soulless woman, with another light laugh, as she kissed her jewelled hand to him in adieu; whereupon he went directly to the office of the hotel to examine the register.

He found the name of "Mrs. Reynolds" recorded there, and, in spite of the disguised hand, he recognized certain characteristics of Ruth's writing, to convince him that his wife had discovered his plans and followed him to Rouen.

He was far from comfortable over this knowledge. He looked at his watch. It was almost one o'clock, and he doubted if Ruth would see him at that hour, even if he should send up his card and demand an interview. At any rate, such a proceeding would be liable to occasion surprise and suspicious conjectures at the hotel, and he accordingly decided that it would be better to wait until morning.

He would rise early, he told himself, insist upon seeing his wife privately, and have it out with her, once for all, making her understand that in the future he would not tolerate any such espionage upon his movements.

Yet, notwithstanding he had wrought himself up to such a pitch of anger over the matter, he slept as soundly as if he had not a care in the world, until the clock upon the mantelshelf in his room struck seven.

He arose and dressed at once, and slipping across the street—for he slept

at a house opposite the Hôtel Despard—sent his card up to "Mrs. Reynolds," just on the stroke of eight.

The messenger returned immediately, saying that the lady was not in her room, and, upon inquiry at the office, Ralph learned, to his chagrin, that she had given orders the previous night to be called at the unusually early hour of five, to catch the morning express train to Paris.

Balked of his purpose, he was more enraged than ever, and began to regard himself as the person aggrieved, rather than the true-hearted little wife towards whom he had proved so unfaithful.

Late on Sunday afternoon, having "had his lark out," he strode noisily into his home, an ugly frown upon his brow, a defiant swagger in his manner, to "assert himself." He found no one in the sitting-room or library, and, proceeding directly upstairs, rudely opened the door of Ruth's private room without even the ceremony of knocking.

He was considerably staggered, however, by the vision that met his view as he entered the room. Instead of the pale face, swollen eyes, and sharp reproaches which he had fully expected to encounter, he found Ruth sitting in a low chair, by a window, that overlooked her pretty garden, quietly reading a magazine.

She made the loveliest picture imaginable, clad in a dainty *négligé* of pale-pink cashmere, coquettishly adorned with satin ribbons of the same hue, her golden hair exquisitely arranged, and fastened with a silver comb.

A delicate flush—caused by the excitement of his arrival—glowed upon her cheeks, and as she turned, at his entrance, her great, beautiful, azure eyes looked up at him with a most serene expression.

His own glance shifted and fell as it encountered hers, and a dull flush of shame mounted to his brow in spite of himself.

"Well, Ralph, so you have returned," she quietly observed. "Did you enjoy the opera season as much as you anticipated?"

An angry oath leaped to his lips; but

something impelled him to check it before he could give it utterance.

"Well," he said, after a moment, as he dropped heavily into a chair, "I suppose you are determined to give me 'Hail, Columbia,' and I may as well face the music first as last."

"Really, I am afraid the national airs of your own country would pall upon your taste after the artistic talent to which you have listened during the past week; so I will spare you," Ruth responded, with quiet sarcasm, but looking as unruffled as a placid lake upon a calm June day.

"Confound it all! you know what I mean; so if you're going to blow my head off for what you've found out, just fire away and be done with it!" he retorted, the veins upon his forehead swelling out full and hard from a sense of mortification at thus having the wind so unexpectedly taken out of his sails.

If she had only cried and sobbed, and reproached him, and thus given him an opportunity to angrily retort, he could have stood the scene much better—he could then have blustered, sworn, and fumed to his heart's content, and regarded himself as the victor in the end.

"I am no Anarchist, Ralph, and I have no dynamite in the house," she returned, with slightly arching brows, but in the same tone as before.

He regarded her in undisguised astonishment.

She was apparently as cool and composed as if she had never known a care or grief in the world; to all appearance, she had not the slightest feeling of resentment over what had occurred—his loving, gentle little wife, whom, until that moment, he had believed he could "wind round his little finger;" and as he all at once recalled her frozen face, as she had stood in Inez Gordon's room that night in Rouen, a sudden fear and keen sense of loss came over him.

Had he killed outright all her affection for him by his neglect and the outrage he had perpetrated against her?

"I do not understand you, Ruth," he said, in slow wonderment, as he searched her lovely face with an anxious gleam in

his eyes. "I supposed, having found me out, there would be a deuce of a scene when I came home. I was prepared for an out-and-out row; and—and I don't know that anyone could blame you, either. Have—haven't you anything to say about the matter?"

"Nothing"—briefly and quietly.

He sat looking at her for a moment or two, while she calmly took a white rose from a vase on the table beside her, and tucked it among the mass of pink ribbons upon her bosom. She looked so dainty and pretty in the act, it seemed to him that he had never half-appreciated how exceedingly lovely she was; while it occurred to him that there might be depths to her character which he had never sounded—which, indeed, it might be dangerous to sound by certain tests that he had employed of late.

He would have given a great deal to be able to read her thoughts at that moment. They were a closed book to him, however, and he found himself wondering, with a strangely apprehensive feeling, if she would ever give him the old confidence, the sweet, outspoken tenderness that she had manifested during the first few weeks of their married life.

He began to feel embarrassed, and finally rose.

"Well," he said, as he moved towards the door, "I think I'll"—

He paused, thought a moment, then turned and walked close up to her.

"Ruth," he began again, "I swear I don't know what to make of you in this mood! What's the reason you are so—so indifferent to—to what has happened? Don't you love me any more?"

In an instant she had sprung to her feet, and stood confronting him with blazing eyes and flaming cheeks. He could not then accuse her of any lack of feeling, for every fibre of her being seemed to quiver with suppressed passion, while he held his breath, absolutely spell-bound, for the moment, by her exquisite beauty.

"Love you!" she exclaimed, in clear, bell-like tones of scorn that were like a whip upon his flesh. "I do not even respect you!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A HUSBAND'S HUMILIATING CONFESSION.

Ruth had said that she was "no Anarchist—that she had no dynamite in the house," but if she had hurled a deadly bomb into his face at that moment, Ralph Plympton could not have been more crushed, figuratively speaking, than he was by this unexpected retort and manifestation of spirit on the part of his usually gentle-mannered wife.

Inez Gordon, in her most brilliant moments, had never been one half so attractive to him as was this dainty statue of snow, so suddenly animated by the fire of a righteous indignation and the assumption of wifely dignity.

With the consciousness of this there also came a sense of a great and irreparable loss. She "did not even respect him."

As he stood there, looking into her clear, pure eyes, and observing her air of conscious rectitude in judging him as she had, he certainly did not respect himself; he knew that he had acted the part of a villain and coward during the last few months in his neglect of her, and allowing himself to be drawn into a net that was likely to prove his ruin, unless he could immediately emancipate himself and turn his back for ever upon his temptress.

At that moment he longed to do so; he could not endure the thought of losing his hold upon the affections of his wife, whom he knew to be all that was admirable, and superior, in every respect, to the girl whom he had allowed to lure him from his allegiance, while in her present mood—which had been such a revelation to him—she was simply adorable, and he was almost ready to fall at her feet and humbly sue for pardon.

But, before he could recover himself sufficiently to frame his thoughts into language, she turned coldly from him, remarking, in a matter-of-fact tone:

"I have delayed dinner for you, Ralph. Will you have it now?—shall I ring to have it served?"

She was so self-possessed, so evidently mistress of the situation, that he scarcely knew how to act, and a feeling of awk-

wardness and embarrassment came over him.

He did not reply for a moment; then he said, "I do not want any dinner, Ruth;" whereupon he turned abruptly and left the room.

Then the poor little wife collapsed. She drew in a long breath that was like a gasp of mortal pain, and burying her face in her hands, shivered from head to foot.

She felt, at that moment, as if every atom of love had died out of her heart, for, as she had told Ralph, she did not even respect him; but, nevertheless, she was wretched, lonely, and inexpressibly heart-hungry.

If he had come home to her in a penitent mood; if he had shown that he despised himself for the wrong he had done her, and given her his promise that he would never see Inez Gordon again, she believed she could have forgiven him and tried to hide the deadly wound he had dealt her.

She would have made a heroic effort to forget herself, that she might help him to break the toils that enslaved him, and to regain the manliness he had lost; she would have struggled to be a faithful, dutiful wife, for the sake of the little one that was to come to them so soon.

But when he had entered her presence with that aggressive frown upon his face—with that swaggering, defiant bearing, assuming, with an injured air, that she was going to "make a scene," and he might as well have it over as soon as possible, he had only sunk still lower in her estimation, and she had found herself recoiling from him with a feeling of repulsion that both startled and dismayed her.

Nevertheless, she was still his wife; his sins did not absolve her from her obligations, and she knew that it was her duty to do her utmost to try to save him for his own sake; and yet, after what had occurred, the task seemed such a mountain, such an almost hopeless one, she felt nearly crushed in view of what lay before her.

But she was a brave woman, although, as yet, there had been but little in her

se to test her courage, and she knew that she could never conquer now, in the battle she was to fight, by tame submission to the wrong that had been done her; here should be no weak display of grief—he would play no heartbroken rôle. She meant to make Ralph realize that her steem was a prize worth the winning; make him recognize and appreciate the wide difference between a selfish, unprincipled, designing coquette, and a true, pure-hearted, self-respecting woman.

She stood for several moments with her face bowed upon her hands while mentally evolving the situation. Then she raised her head and resolutely calmed herself. She paced the length of her room two or three times, after which she went to the glass and carefully rearranged her slightly disordered hair, and satisfied herself that her face did not betray traces of recent motion.

Then she went to Ralph's door and knocked gently.

"Ralph," she called, in a clear, untroubled tone, "I am going to ring to have dinner served. Don't you think it will be better to come to the table, even if you are not hungry, to save gossip among the servants?"

There was a moment of silence. Then a voice inside replied:

"Very well; I will come, Ruth."

She passed downstairs to the dining-room, where she was presently joined by Ralph, who had had the grace to freshen himself up a bit for the meal, which, however, he dreaded beyond expression.

But Ruth had no notion of allowing her servants to suspect the state of affairs, and at once opened a brisk conversation, touching upon various things that had occurred during his absence; referring with the utmost composure to various accounts and criticisms of the recent opera, which she had read in the papers, and then passing to the latest magazines, which he had not yet seen, gave him a bright little *résumé* of their contents that would have done credit to a literary critic.

Her husband regarded her with astonishment; he had never suspected her of possessing such reserve force as

this, and he became uncomfortably conscious that he did not compare favourably with her in his sullen taciturnity.

It was a blessed relief to both, however, when the meal was over and the miserable farce at an end.

Ralph immediately retired to his own room again, while Ruth went straight to bed, with a raging headache and a worse heartache.

But the next morning she appeared at breakfast, looking as fresh as a peach, when she was as charmingly vivacious as during the evening previous.

But Ralph well knew that behind that blooming face and untroubled manner there lurked a purpose and resolution that would never bend; that she would never compromise her self-respect one iota, and that there would have to be marked concessions on his part, if he hoped ever to resume even friendly relations with her.

He inwardly blamed himself for a fool and a knave, for having allowed himself to be led into the toils of Inez Gordon; for being so weak and vacillating as to be governed by every impulse and desire that moved him.

On leaving the dining-room he followed Ruth to her sitting-room, determined to come to some understanding at once; he could no longer endure such a state of things. He went directly to her side and tried to draw her into his arms.

"Darling, you have not kissed me since I came home. Can't you forgive me?" he pleaded, resuming his most affectionate tone and manner.

Kiss him! after a week spent away from her in Inez Gordon's society! For an instant the sweet blue eyes flashed with a fire that was like lightning. Then she controlled herself, and, gently disengaging herself from his arm, looked gravely up into his face.

"What do you mean by 'forgive,' Ralph?" she quietly inquired.

"Why, to—to forget what has happened, let it all pass, and be my own loving little wife once more," he responded, with some confusion, for the pointed question and the look in those clear, searching eyes made him exceedingly uncomfortable.

"That is what you wish me to do," she returned, and flushing slightly; "but what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" he demanded, crimsoning to his temples. "Do you want me to get down upon my knees and grovel at your feet?"

"By no means; knee-service and grovelling at one's feet are not repentance," she quietly replied; "but, of course, I cannot 'forget'—I cannot 'let it all pass,' without some assurance from you that I shall never again be subjected to the same neglect and humiliation. You"—

"Well?" he said, as she paused; but there was a sullen note in the tone.

"You will surely give me some pledge of your sincerity—you will promise me you will break at once and for ever with that woman," she continued, gravely; "that you will never see her again; that you will take me immediately away from Paris, where neither of us will be in danger of coming in contact with her."

There was an awkward pause when she ceased, while Ralph stood with his eyes fixed upon the carpet, a look of indecision plainly stamped upon his face.

"Ralph, you will promise me—for your own sake as well as for mine," Ruth earnestly remarked, after watching him for a moment.

"I—I'm afraid I can't quite promise that, Ruthie—at least, not just yet," he said, hesitatingly.

"Why?" she briefly demanded.

"Because—I owe her a great deal of money," he confessed, with still averted eyes.

"You owe that woman—money!" exclaimed Ruth, astonished.

"Yes; I began to get behindhand at the hotel with—ahem!—with the expenses of the doctors, the nurse, and—everything; she found it out, and offered to—to help me, and"—

He got thus far, then faltered and stopped, as if suddenly realizing his meanness in assuming that he had been obliged to borrow from Inez Gordon in order to meet the expenses occasioned by his wife's illness.

"Ralph Plympton! do you mean to tell me that you have been using *her* money to support *me*; that the food I have eaten, the shelter I have had, the clothes I am wearing, my doctor's and nurse's bills, have been paid for with *her* gold?" the young wife demanded, with blazing eyes and scarlet cheeks.

"Well, Ruthie, I didn't mean to put it just that way," he returned, in a deprecatory tone; "and, really, I have no one but myself to blame, for you urged me to leave the hotel long before we did so. But—I—I haven't been used to being stinted in my income, you know, and so I became embarrassed before I knew it."

This was like another cruel dagger-thrust in the sensitive heart of his wife, for it reminded her that, on account of his marriage with her, he had been discarded by his father, and thus had been obliged to support the two of them upon less than he had previously spent upon himself.

She did not appear to notice it, however; one thought was, "I must try to save him." But her face was strangely white as she quietly asked:

"How much money do you owe Miss Gordon, Ralph?"

"Never mind, Ruth; I'll manage to pay her somehow," he said, reassuringly, but ashamed to confess his indebtedness.

"You must tell me; I have a right to know," she persisted, imperatively.

"Well, then, about twenty-five thousand francs," he reluctantly admitted.

"That is five thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"Ralph, you have never spent any such amount upon our support!" Ruth exclaimed, with a flash of indignation. "I know the doctor's and nurse's bills were heavy; I know what you paid for our rooms and board at the hotel; but counting all that, together with the clothing and jewels you have given me, I know, with your own income, there was no need of your getting in debt to such an amount."

The young man flushed, for he knew but too well that a great deal of the money that he had borrowed of Inez Gordon had been lavishly thrown away

upon her; but, of course, he was not going to confess this to his wife. So, assuming an injured air, he said:

"Well, I suppose I am not the best financier in the world. I own that I have been extravagant, but the fact remains that the money has been spent in some way, and I am in a deucedly uncomfortable hole."

Ruth thought a moment, an anxious look in her large blue eyes.

"Ralph, you have never told me what your income is," she said, at length. "Just how much have you to depend upon yearly?"

"About six thousand dollars."

"And you have already spent that, and five thousand more!" was the quick, horrified rejoinder.

"Not quite; I still have some money, and my quarter's allowance will be due in a few days."

"Then you have twelve hundred and fifty dollars due you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," said this brave little woman, the lines about her mouth settling into an expression of strong determination, "I know that we can live on a great deal less than that during the next three months. Papa never had that much for a whole year's salary. We will go away to some quiet place where we are not known, and stay during the next few weeks. Then if you will take enough from your principal to pay Miss Gordon, we will live economically until we can make it up again."

"But I have no principal to draw from, Ruth," Ralph replied, with a frown; "it is held in trust for the next generation. I am only allowed the income."

"Ah!" said Ruth, with a little thrill of comfort at this information. "Then give your note of hand to Miss Gordon; or perhaps your father would lend you the amount, and allow you to pay him as you could."

She felt that she could never rest until this hateful debt was paid.

Ralph laughed out bitterly at this latter suggestion.

"I may as well tell you, first as last, that there is no hope from that direction,"

he said, irritably. "The governor has thrown me over altogether."

"Because of—of me?" the young wife questioned, breathlessly.

"Because I would have my own way," he returned, ashamed of himself for having told her.

She flushed a pained crimson, but after a moment went on:

"Then, as soon as we can, let us go home, where, perhaps, you might get some position with a salary sufficient to support us. I know I could manage nicely upon very little, and then it would not take us more than a year to pay this debt."

"I get a position, Ruth! Do you imagine that I am going to work for my living," he demanded, staring at her in amazement. "I never did a day's work in my life, and—I never will!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A SPY IN THE CAMP.

"No, madam," Ralph continued, in an angry tone, after a slight pause, during which his wife had regarded him with as much surprise as he had manifested at her suggestion; "you have greatly mistaken your man if you think I am going to begin to toil for my daily bread, after having had an independent income at my command all my life."

"Well," Ruth spiritedly replied, while her delicate nostrils dilated with scorn, "because you have never worked is no reason why you never will. I would do almost anything rather than be in debt; it is dishonourable, and to be in debt to an unprincipled woman is worst of all. However," she went on, "since that suggestion is distasteful to you, perhaps we can arrange some other way. You have given me expensive jewels, Ralph; you can have them all, and welcome. Sell them for the most you can get, pay the money to Miss Gordon, and tell her she shall have the remainder as soon as you can raise it."

The young man laughed out amusedly at her earnestness, his previous anger all vanishing in view of such a spirit of self-abnegation.

"Take away your jewels, Ruthie! No, indeed, I couldn't do that, for I love to see you wear them," he said, lightly.

"Then what will you do to free yourself from the power of that bad woman?" she cried, excitedly tapping the floor with her little foot.

"Oh, she will not bother me"—Ralph began.

"You cannot be sure of that," Ruth hastily interposed, "for she will, of course, be offended with you if you break with her."

"Nonsense, child! You know I cannot do that all at once."

"Ralph, you must," Ruth imperatively said. "After what has occurred, there can be no half-way measures. You must take me immediately away from Paris. I wish we could go to England, and be among English-speaking people," she concluded, with a yearning sigh.

"Pshaw!" Ralph impatiently ejaculated; "such a change as that is out of the question at present. You are nicely settled in a home of your own, just as you wanted to be, and I think it best for you to remain here."

"Well, then, what of your future relations with Miss Gordon?" Ruth coldly inquired, but looking pale and anxious.

"Little wife," said Ralph, evasively, but assuming his tenderest manner, "I never could have believed you could be so persistent. Don't you see, it will not do for me to be rude to Miss Gordon; but I promise you that I will never offend you again as I did last week. Does that satisfy you, dear?"

"No, Ralph, it does not," she frankly answered. "Nothing will 'satisfy' me but to get away from her entirely, for I believe her to be utterly devoid of principle. I believe she hates me because you married me, and is deliberately planning to ruin my happiness. I do not wish to be unjust to you, Ralph, even though you have wronged me sorely, and I will try to trust you, only"—

"Only what, pet?"

"If you care to win my confidence again, you will have to prove that you mean what you have said."

There was no sign of anger or vindictive-

ness in her look, tone, or manner; she spoke with a sweet dignity, looking him steadily in the eyes; the while, and claiming only what she believed to be just to her due.

She was so attractive in this earnest mood, in spite of the plainness of her speech—so lovable and worthy of the best that a true man could give her—that her husband's heart yearned towards her with an impulse of passionate affection.

"I will, love—I surely will; and I have been a brute to make you so unhappy," he said, in a tone of self-reproach, as he stooped and kissed her fondly on the brow.

An admonitory cough just at that moment caused the young couple to turn to ascertain whence it proceeded, and they saw Ruth's maid standing in a doorway behind them.

"Well, what is it, Nina?" Ruth inquired, but flushing with annoyance to know that her husband's caress had been observed by a third party.

"I came to ask madam if she will have the carriage ordered for the same hour as yesterday," said the girl, as she modestly (?) dropped her eyes to the floor.

"Mr. Plympton will attend to that to-day, Nina," Ruth coldly returned.

The servant curtsied and withdrew but with a sly smile on her lips as she went.

"Ralph, I do not like that girl," Ruth remarked; "she has a most prying disposition. Where did you find her?"

The young man flushed.

He did not like to tell her that Ine Gordon had secured her for him, so he carelessly answered:

"Oh, a friend of Russell's recommended her. I am sure she looks bright and capable."

"Yes, as far as her qualifications for her position are concerned, she is every thing that is desirable," said Ruth; "but somehow, I do not trust her. I found her at my writing-desk yesterday; she explained that she was only dusting and putting it in order; but I am sure I saw her slip some letters back into a drawer. And then, too, she has a way of appearing

in such an unexpected manner, as she did just now, that makes me very uncomfortable."

"Well, if you don't like her, send her off, and get some one else," Ralph said, suppressing a yawn.

"I suppose I might; but I dislike so to make a change," sighed Ruth; "and, besides, she speaks English, which is a great advantage."

If she could have seen Nina closeted with Inez Gordon that evening, and heard her repeating to her, almost verbatim, the conversation that had passed between the young husband and wife, she might well have thought that there was cause to distrust her.

"So," muttered Miss Gordon, when the girl had gone, after telling her story, for which she was well paid—"so that doll-faced baby wants to get him away from Paris, and she made him promise that he would never offend her in the same way again. Ha, ha! does she imagine that his promises will amount to anything? Does she think that her hold upon him is stronger than mine? We shall see! I did not swear a vendetta against them with any intention of being baffled in my purpose."

Nina Gascoigne was not only Ruth's maid, but also a spy in the house, as has already been intimated.

When Ruth was able to sit up after her illness, she insisted that her trained nurse must be dispensed with; but Ralph would only listen to such an arrangement upon condition that a maid be installed in her place, and, having mentioned in Inez Gordon's hearing his desire to obtain such an attendant, that scheming individual immediately offered to make inquiries among the servants at the hotel for a reliable lady's-maid.

Thus she was enabled to place her spy in the very heart of the enemy's camp, and so managed to keep herself posted regarding all that occurred there.

But Ruth was so annoyed by this last discovery of eavesdropping on the part of her servant, she determined to get rid of her as soon as possible. This would not only relieve her of her disagreeable presence, but also be a step towards certain

economical plans which she had in view.

Her month would be up the following day, when she resolved to pay her a month's salary in lieu of the customary notice, and dismiss her.

But, alas! her plans were destined to be frustrated, for, before the month was up, she was called upon to fight a desperate battle for her life.

For two never-to-be-forgotten days she lay hovering between life and death, and Ralph Plympton, watching the fearful struggle, was conscience-smitten, and said to himself that if his sweet wife could be spared him, he would never cause her another pang or tear so long as they both should live.

The long season of suspense ended at last, and the decree went forth that both mother and child would live.

For a week Ralph scarcely left the house; nor could he be persuaded to leave the bedside where that pale, beautiful woman and that tiny bit of humanity lay.

But, after that, as both continued to do well, he began to go out and frequent his old haunts again; although, to his credit be it said, he scrupulously kept away from Inez Gordon.

She, shrewdly comprehending the situation, let him alone for the time. She merely kept herself in mind by sending every day to inquire for the invalid and the interesting little stranger, always accompanying her messages with a wealth of flowers, which Ruth fondly believed were her husband's offerings.

He was very tender and attentive during those days, and seemed really delighted with his baby-girl, whom he insisted upon naming "Hope."

"Let her be the precious link that shall reunite us for all time," he had whispered, with a sudden rush of emotion, and with his lips lying close against her cheek.

"Ah, she will indeed be a blessed hope, an inspiration, if she can do that," Ruth responded, her face lighting with sudden joy. Then she added, gravely and appealingly, "And that, of course, means, Ralph, that you have utterly renounced all the past—that you will never see her again;

and you will take baby and me home to America as soon as we are able to travel?"

"Yes," he answered; but his eyes wavered before her searching glance. "As soon as I can settle up everything we will go home; at any rate, she shall never come between us again."

Ruth sighed gently.

"Do not let us wait for anything. Let us go at once," she pleaded.

"Well, perhaps. I will see," he evasively replied.

He believed himself to be sincere, and, in justice to him, be it said, his quarterly interest having been received a few days previous, he had sent Miss Gordon a cheque for a hundred pounds, as an instalment upon what he owed her, and asked her to return him a receipt for the same.

But the cheque had been returned, with a note telling him that the matter could rest until some time when he could find it convenient to pay the whole amount; she preferred it so—she did not need the money; while, surely, with his recent heavy expenses, he must find it embarrassing to make such a payment at that time.

It was strange that the young man did not see through this device—see that it was a part of her scheme to keep him in her power; but he did not, and heaved a sigh of relief as he replaced the cheque in his pocket-book, telling himself that "Inez was a trump, and as generous as a prince with her money."

Later, on the very day after his promise to "go home as soon as he could arrange to do so," a bundle of American periodicals had come to him, and among them a copy of the Albany *Argus*.

As he unfolded this paper, his eye was arrested by some conspicuous head-lines, reading thus:

Destructive fire in State-street. Sad death of Lawyer Grant, City Clerk, who, while trying to save valuable records, fell a victim to the flames.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ralph, with a violent start and a shudder of horror, "what a terrible fate! And—and— Good heavens!"

He suddenly paused short, and was soon absorbed in reading the more detailed account of the tragedy.

The fire had originated, he read, in the building adjoining the lawyer's office, but before he learned the fact his own was in flames. Nevertheless, Mr. Grant had bravely dared everything in his eagerness to save important papers and the records entrusted to him. He succeeded in removing the contents of his safe, and was on his way out, when a terrific explosion occurred in the drug store underneath, and the building sank in ruins, burying the ill-fated lawyer in the débris.

Ralph Plympton's face wore a blank expression as he concluded this harrowing account.

"Humph!" he mused, "with that certificate lost, those records burned, and old Grant dead, there isn't a scrap of tangible evidence to prove the validity of our marriage!"

He sat absorbed in thought for some time, the paper slipping unheeded upon the floor, but finally, a frown of annoyance fitting across his face, he started up and left the house.

The door had scarcely closed after him, when Nina, Ruth's maid, emerged from a curtained alcove, secured the paper that had so agitated her master, and eagerly devoured the report he had been reading.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she chuckled, as, from the account and Ralph's ejaculations, she shrewdly comprehended the situation, "it is like a scene from a romance. A sweet morsel for Mademoiselle Gordon—a handful of gold for Nina Gascoigne!"

Folding the paper into the smallest possible compass, she deftly concealed it among the folds of her dress, and hastened from the room.

Later, when Ralph inquired for the sheet, she told him, with an innocent air, that, supposing him to be done with it, she had thrown it among the rubbish.

He unsuspiciously accepted this explanation, and thought no more about the matter, his chief anxiety having been to keep it from Ruth, lest she should fret over the tragedy and the loss of the records.

He was beginning to grow weary of the tame life he had been leading of late—the novelty of his new possession was wearing away, or rather merging into irritation and annoyance at the noise of a crying child, and all the “fuss” over it; for it must be confessed that little Miss Hope possessed a sound pair of lungs, which she made use of in the most emphatic manner both day and night.

So gradually the young man drifted back into the old lines, until, before his child was a month old, almost every day found him again the companion of Inez Gordon, either riding, walking, or attending some place of amusement with her.

Ruth was not long in surmising something of the true state of things, but when she attempted to call her husband to account for his frequent absences, he would cut her short with some curt, irritable reply, that effectually sealed her lips, and she was forced to resign herself to the inevitable, with what patience she could command.

As soon as she was able, she wrote to Basil Meredith, from whom she had not heard one word since her last visit to the hospital, as Ralph could not be persuaded to call and to explain her absence. She told him of the birth of her little daughter, inquired kindly regarding the state of his health, and closed by saying that she hoped to see him again in the near future.

In reply she received a friendly note of congratulation, which was accompanied by an exquisite basket of lilies of the valley for “Miss Hope Plympton.”

Mr. Meredith told her that he had sadly missed her visits, all the more because he had had a serious relapse, but he hoped now to soon get out, when he should give himself the pleasure of calling upon her and the “little stranger within her gates.”

One morning, when her child was six weeks old, Ruth took her baby out for her first drive. She had been out herself two or three times, for a short ride, but until to-day had not felt equal to the care of her little one.

She was feeling somewhat anxious and depressed, for Ralph had not come home the night previous, and so she took Hope

with her to occupy her attention and keep her from thinking about her troubles.

The fresh air and sunshine did her good, however; baby, throughout the drive, was in a delightfully social mood, cooing and otherwise expressing her appreciation of the bright world into which she had come; and Ruth was a picture of loveliness, with the fond light of motherhood shining in her eyes, and the flush of returning health on her cheeks, when she returned to her pretty home.

But, as she stepped over the threshold, a sudden chill fell upon her heart.

“Has Mr. Plympton returned?” she asked of Nina.

“He has been in, madam, and gone again.”

“Gone!—Where?” Ruth breathed, with a quick catch in her tone.

“He left a note for madam,” the girl replied, as she took the child from her; for since Hope’s coming she had acted the part of nurse to the little one.

Ruth flew to her chamber, found the note upon her writing-desk, and tore it open with trembling fingers.

As she did so a cheque for two thousand five hundred francs fluttered out, but she heeded it not, for her eyes were glued to the few lines before her:

Have been called unexpectedly away. Do not know exactly when I shall return. The enclosed cheque will be sufficient for your present needs. R. P.

“What does he mean? What a very unsatisfactory note!” the young wife exclaimed, with white lips and a sinking heart.

For several minutes she sat like one stunned, and was only aroused by the entrance of Nina.

“A letter for madam,” she briefly said, as she presented Ruth with a sealed envelope, and then quickly withdrew.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW RUTH MET THE DEADLY BLOW.

Ruth glanced with some surprise at the superscription, for she had never seen the handwriting before.

Then, wondering who could have been

the writer, but with that same chill still at her heart, she mechanically broke the seal, unfolded the sheet within, and read :

I once told you that Ralph Plympton had trifled with me beyond all forgiveness, and I had sworn to make him pay dearly for it. I was balked in my efforts to interrupt your European trip with my "faithless lover," but my vengeance was only delayed. I have won the game at last, as you will understand when I tell you that your "husband" and I leave together this morning for Rome, where we expect to remain indefinitely.

INEZ GORDON.

For a full minute after reading the above brutal communication, Ruth Plympton sat staring at it like one bereft of reason. Then a cry of mortal agony broke from her rigid lips.

"Deserted!" she wailed, and then slipped from her chair to the floor in blessed unconsciousness.

When she came to herself, she was lying upon her bed in the adjoining chamber.

The crying of her child had aroused her, and with a strange feeling of numbness blunting her sensibilities, yet vaguely knowing that something dreadful had happened to her, she rose and went to her, taking her from Nina, who was trying to quiet the child by walking the floor with her.

Dismissing the girl, who now seemed positively repulsive to her, she devoted herself to the task of soothing her little one, who soon fell into a quiet slumber. Then she sat down to think, for memory had reasserted itself, and her woeful situation stared her in the face.

"Deserted!" she murmured again; but now there was no wail of agony in her tones—only a bitter sternness vibrant through them.

She arose, and, going to her sitting-room, found those two fatal notes, and read them again.

"It is as I thought," she said, on finishing Inez Gordon's letter; "she deliberately followed us to Paris with the sole purpose of ruining our lives. And Ralph, poor, weak, vacillating Ralph, had neither principle nor love enough to resist her cunning wiles. Like

many another rich man's 'only son,' too much wealth and indulgence have spoiled him—have so pampered and warped his character that he has no strength of purpose to withstand a stronger will than his own."

She gave utterance to a sigh that bespoke more of pity and contempt than of grief. Then she drew herself proudly erect.

"Yes, I am a deserted wife!" she repeated; "but the blow will not crush me; it shall not even unnerve me," she went on, proudly, although her face was as white as that of a marble Psyche on a bracket above her, "for I no longer love him; I found that out after that Rouen affair, though I might have settled back into a state of tolerable content, for baby's sake, if he had continued faithful. I believe now that I never really loved him; yet he certainly stirred my girlish heart as no other man had ever done, while he seemed so truly noble and good when he insisted upon marrying me, in spite of his parents' opposition. But it was only an impulse; he is a man of utterly selfish impulses, and that was one of them.

"Oh, if I had but met Inez Gordon twenty-four hours earlier," she continued, after a momentary pause, "I never should have been in the forlorn condition that I am to-day; and yet"—with a fond glance into the other room where her darling lay sleeping in her dainty cradle—"I am not utterly miserable. I have that priceless little treasure to love. But, oh!"—with a start of pain—"can I bear to have her grow up fatherless, and learn the disgrace which he has this day entailed upon her and me?"

She clasped her hands over her heart as if to still its throes of agony; she threw herself into the nearest chair, sobbing bitterly.

Her own great wrongs she might have borne in proud silence, but when she thought of their effect upon the child of her love, her heart throbbed with anguish; and for more than an hour she fought this second battle most rebelliously.

By degrees, however, she became more calm, although she remained closely shut

in her room throughout the day, and did not once close her eyes in sleep during the night that followed.

It was a long and bitter vigil, and one that tested to the utmost the mettle of which she was made.

Towards morning her little one awoke and claimed her care for a time. She was almost spent, but she would not call the nurse. She could not bear that any one should look upon her until she had buried her dead and sealed the sepulchre for all time.

When at length her little one slept again, she laid her back in her tiny bed, and then stood looking mournfully down upon her.

"It is over," she murmured; and the first grey light of dawn began to creep in at the windows as she spoke. "The battle is fought, and my dream of love—for it has been only a dream—is broken. It has been a bitter ordeal: I feel as if I had passed through a furnace seven times heated; but from this hour I know that I shall be a stronger, although I may not be a better, woman. I will put the past out of my life as far as it is possible to do so. I will not even cherish a spirit of bitterness against those who have so wronged me. I will simply blot them out of my existence, and devote myself to the work of rearing my child to be a good woman, teaching her to guard against making the fatal mistake that I have made."

When the breakfast-bell rang she changed the street-dress, which she had not removed, for a morning robe, and went down to make a brave pretence of eating her lonely meal.

Afterwards she called Nina and the second girl to her, paid them their wages, and to each the salary for an additional month, and dismissed them.

Then she had an interview with her cook, who was a kind-hearted, though not very bright, English woman, and arranged with her to remain for a week or two longer, or until she could get her packing done and prepare to return to her own country.

She said nothing about her husband's absence; she made no explanations re-

garding her own movements; but went quietly and calmly about her work, as if she had indeed "blotted out" of her mind the bitter past, and fixed her eye upon a certain goal for the future.

She became so absorbed in her duties that the day passed and the evening came on almost before she was aware of it, and, although very weary from her labours, she uttered a sigh of regret because of the long hours that must be passed before she could take up her work again.

The house seemed very silent and lonely, and, after the little one was asleep, she took up a book and tried to read.

It was a vain effort, however; she could not fix her thoughts upon it, and, finally, laid it down with an impatient sigh. Then, feeling that she must do something to pass away the time, she brought her work-basket and began to sew upon a little dress for Hope.

Suddenly the door-bell rang, and she bounded from her chair with a nervous cry.

"Could it be that Ralph had returned?" she mentally questioned, with a sinking heart. "Had he dared to come back, hoping that she would condone his faithlessness for the second time, even though he should repent in sackcloth and ashes?"

She sat motionless while the cook answered the summons, and heard her usher some one into the room below.

Presently the woman appeared at her door, bearing a card in her coarse, red hand.

"A gentleman to see you, mum," she said, in her broad English, which, however, was a great comfort to Ruth.

She took the bit of pasteboard, and read, with a start of surprise, the name of "Basil Meredith."

She went down to him immediately, and found him looking very thin and pale, but so noble and true, with that kind light in his eyes and a friendly smile upon his lips, that, in spite of his still misshapen form, it was inexpressibly comforting just to look at him.

"Oh, I am so sorry—I am so glad!" she faltered, hardly knowing what she said, as she impulsively held out both hands to him.

"That sounds very paradoxical, my friend," he smilingly returned, although he searched her wan face with anxious eyes.

"Yes," she answered, her sad lips relaxing a trifle; "my first impulse was to tell you how sorry I am to find you still looking so ill; my second, to say how glad I am that you have come just at this time—that is, if you are not imprudent in so doing."

"I hope not," he replied. "I received my discharge to-day, and as the evening seemed so warm and lovely, I thought I might venture here. Are you not well?" he concluded, still regarding her with grave earnestness.

"Yes, I am well—physically," Ruth responded, with some embarrassment, and with lips that trembled painfully.

The moment she had read his name her first thought had been, "I will tell him; he will advise me what to do;" but now that the moment had come she felt so humiliated that her lips refused to give expression to her misery.

"That qualification is sadly suggestive, dear Mrs. Plympton. Can I help you in any way?" he gently inquired.

"Oh, yes," she cried, in a voice of agony, as she lifted a glance of pathetic appeal to him. "I feel as if you could be a tower of strength to me. I want you to advise me, for I am very wretched, and have not a relative—scarcely a friend—in all the world. Mr. Meredith, my husband has deserted me."

Her companion regarded her in mute astonishment for a moment.

"Mrs. Plympton! surely I have misunderstood you!" he managed to falter at last. "It cannot be possible that Mr. Plympton has been guilty of an act so rash—so dreadful!"

It is true; they went away together yesterday morning, and I have already made my preparations to return to America," she explained, becoming more calm, now that the truth was out.

"'They'? Who went with him?" Basil Meredith demanded, with white lips—a gleam like lightning in his eyes.

That 'sullen woman'—Luz Gordon," Ruth replied. Then she turned

forth the whole story to him, telling him everything that had occurred since their arrival in Paris, for she felt that she must share her burden with some one—she must have comfort and sympathy, or her stricken heart would burst.

Her companion listened without once interrupting her, but looking so stern and relentless—so like a statue of Justice carved from stone—that Ruth felt that the fugitives would have had little to hope for if their case had been tried before him as their judge.

"That woman will have a great deal to answer for by-and-by," he remarked, in a constrained tone, as she concluded. "I thank you for confiding in me so freely, Mrs. Plympton. Now tell me what I can do for you."

"I do not think there is anything, Mr. Meredith, thank you," Ruth answered, flushing. "I must learn to depend upon myself, and you are not strong enough yet to assume the cares of any one save your own."

"I am getting stronger every day," he smilingly replied, "and I feel like a free man to be rid of that old pain; so let me do something for you, if you need assistance in any way."

"Of course, I cannot remain here," said Ruth, with a sigh, as she glanced round the pretty room. "As I told you, I am getting ready to go home, and the sooner I can leave Paris the better I shall like it."

"My dear Mrs. Plympton, you must not think of attempting such a journey alone—you never could endure it, and have the care of your little one besides." Mr. Meredith gravely remarked. Then he added, thoughtfully, "I, too, am going home very soon; if you could wait a couple of weeks, I am sure I could be of some assistance to you. More than that, I am to have under my care a very good sort of woman who is going to her son in New York, and who, I am sure, would be a great help with little Miss Hope."

"Oh, that would be very nice!" exclaimed the young mother, with a feeling of intense relief. "Of course, I will gladly wait; it will be such a comfort not to be obliged to go alone," she con-

cluded, choking back a sob that nearly escaped her.

"How strange," she went on, lifting a confiding look to him after a moment, "that you should happen to come to my aid in every serious emergency! You have proved yourself my good genius, Mr. Meredith, and I am very grateful."

"Pray do not attach so much importance to what little service I may have been able to render you," said the gentleman, deprecatingly. "There is nothing I would not have done to save you this crowning sorrow," he added, pitifully. Then, with sudden passion, "I am not a vindictive man naturally, but, if that weak coward were within my reach at this moment, I am afraid he would fare badly in my hands. Ah, forgive me!" he interposed, flushing; "perchance I am only wounding you more deeply in speaking thus of one whom you may still love, in spite of the wrong he has done you."

Ruth lifted her grave eyes to his.

"Mr. Meredith, there is not one atom of affection in my heart for the man whose name I must continue to bear for the sake of my child," she said, with cold scorn. "He has slain it beyond the possibility of resurrection."

Mr. Meredith regarded her in silence for a moment, his lips tremulous, his lids flushing with an involuntary start of tears. It was inexpressibly sad to look upon her in all her fresh young beauty, and know that her life was so hopelessly blighted.

But he made no reply to what she had said; he conversed a while longer about their arrangements for the voyage; then, bidding her a kind good night, he left her with a promise that he would see her again soon.

"What an idiot Ralph Plympton has shown himself!" he muttered, as he left the house; "he has bartered an angel for a fiend. But he will reap a righteous reward, and that in the near future, or I am greatly mistaken. Oh, Heaven! could I but have won the love of such a woman," he concluded, a bitter sob escaping him, "my life would not have been the blighted existence it is to-day."

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR DEFEAT.

Thus it was arranged that Ruth should wait a couple of weeks, then return to America in company with Basil Meredith and Madame Lintel, the mother of a man whom, on a previous visit to Paris, Mr. Meredith had helped on his way to the New World and started there in business.

So much had already been done, it did not take Ruth long to get everything in order for her departure, and her preparations completed, the time dragged heavily upon her hands.

Had it not been for little Hope, who was growing more interesting every day, she felt that she could not have borne this season of weary waiting; she could not read; she could not work; and her love for her child alone sustained her.

The two weeks were nearly up, when Mr. Meredith came to her one evening, saying that he had been disappointed regarding some of his business arrangements, and would be obliged to postpone his departure for another fortnight.

Ruth regretted this delay exceedingly, but, of course, she preferred to await his convenience rather than forego his protection and companionship on her long journey.

Mr. Meredith was improving in health and strength every day, and seemed to have recovered much of his former energy; while he was so manly, so kind and thoughtful for her, she grew to appreciate him more and more.

The third week passed, and then one morning there came to her a telegram that was like

Ossa on Pelion piled.

It was dated from Rome, September 3rd, and read thus:

Ralph Plympton is dying at the hospital here with small pox. Have you any commands?
INEZ GORDON.

By some means the horrible message had been delayed three days—for it was then the 6th—and much might have happened in that time; while, no doubt, her enemy was waiting for some reply to her dreadful communication.

"What a fate!" Ruth exclaimed, realizing all that the telegram signifying the death of Ralph meant to her. She shivered and covered her eyes as if to shut out some repulsive vision.

Feeling utterly helpless regarding her duty in the matter, she sent at once for Mr. Meredith. Her messenger had not been gone half an hour, when a carriage dashed to the door. Ruth, thinking it must be Mr. Meredith, started up to greet him, as she heard her attendant admit some one.

Then there was the sound of quick steps upon the stairs, the rustling of silken garments, and the next moment Inez Gordon stood in her presence.

"You!" gasped Ruth, sinking back, pale and trembling, upon the chair from which she had just arisen.

"Yes, I," retorted the girl, with a gleam of hate in her wicked eyes, though she, too, looked haggard and worn. "I sent a message to you three days ago, telling you that your husband was dying at Rue of small-pox. I heard nothing from you in response, and I come now to tell you that—he is dead."

"Dead!" hoarsely whispered Ruth, with hot, dry lips.

"Yes; it was a terribly malignant case," the unfeeling woman went on, and appearing to take a sort of grim pleasure in rehearsing this revolting tragedy. "He was prostrated two weeks ago to-day—ugh!" she interjected, shuddering with repulsion; "I never dreamed it was anything more than a cold until I had nursed him three days, and was nearly wild when the doctor came and told me what ailed him. He was taken immediately to the hospital, where they thought he might possibly pull through, until the first of this week, when the disease took an unfavourable turn. Meantime, I had changed my hotel and taken every precaution against infection. Monday morning I received a telegram—they telegraphed me twice a day—that he was dying, and I repeated the message to you. I heard nothing in reply, and at night, when they wired me that he was dead, I started at once for Paris."

Ruth had sat like one frozen during

this dreadful recital; she could move neither hand nor foot; and yet she was not conscious of any pain—only a strange numbness throughout her being. It was as if her heart had been seared with an iron heated to white heat, thus destroying all sensibility.

The most that she seemed to realize at that moment was the fact that Inez Gordon, the woman who had so wronged her, was there in her presence, telling her revolting story, and gloating over the wreck of human lives that she had made.

She felt that she must get rid of her; she could not endure the sight of her. With a mighty effort, she arose from her chair, clutching the back of it for support, and stood, white and cold, before her.

"You say that Ralph is—dead?" she questioned, in a lifeless voice.

"Yes, that is exactly what I said; can't you comprehend it?" was the impatient retort, while the woman regarded her curiously.

"Are you sure? What proof have you?"

"The words of the physician who sent me a report twice a day, as I told you. Here it is;" and she drew forth the last message that she had received from the hospital.

Ruth took it mechanically, and read at a glance:

Mr. Plympton expired at five this morning. His body has been removed, and will be properly cared for by the hospital authorities.

Ruth shivered.

Yes, without a doubt, it was true—her husband was dead.

So another act in the drama of her life had been played out, and the curtain had been dropped upon it.

"What next?" she wondered, wearily, and with an irritating sense of being strangely apathetic over Ralph's tragic fate. She knew there was nothing she could do but to accept the fact of his death; although she was vaguely conscious that it would have been a relief to her if she could have given him decent burial, and been able to leave some tablet to mark his grave, in case his father

should wish to know where he had been laid.

She stood looking down upon that fatal message, thinking in this dull, half-conscious way, while her companion regarded her in awed amazement.

She had come there expecting to see the young wife utterly overcome with grief and despair. Her "vendetta" had been accomplished; she had succeeded in parting the young husband and wife, and ruining their happiness; but it had ended rather differently from what she had anticipated. She had not wanted either of her victims to die: it had been her desire that both of them should live, that she might gloat over the wreck that she had wrought.

More than this, here was the girl whom she hated conducting herself with a stony calmness and self-possession that literally staggered her. She had expected her to be crushed beneath the blow that had been dealt her that morning—that she would weakly wail and lament, and refuse to be comforted.

She was even more amazed when, after a few moments, Ruth raised her head and coolly remarked:

"If this is all that you have to tell me, Miss Gordon, I wish you would go."

Her companion started as if a lash had stung her, and flushed hotly.

"Well, I must say you take things coolly!" she exclaimed, with mingled anger and wonder. "I begin to think that you could not have been very fond of that weak-minded husband of yours, after all. Why?"—with a start—"I am almost inclined to think that you are glad to be freed from him!"

"I do not care to discuss that or any other subject with you. Will you go?" Ruth returned, with slow composure, but with lips so rigid that they could scarcely frame the words.

"Will I go, and leave you with only your empty rooms and senseless walls as witnesses to your grief?" shrilly demanded Inez Gordon. "No, not until I have had my say out. You escaped me once, through the intervention of Basil Meredith, but you are at my mercy now, and you little know the character you have to

deal with, Ruth Plympton. I have Spanish blood in my veins—there is something of the Romany character about me—and I never forgive an injury!"—

"I have never injured you," Ruth interposed at this point.

"Well, not directly, perhaps; and yet you have indirectly, through your marriage to Ralph Plympton. I intended to marry him myself," she went on, with brazen insolence. "Not because I loved him. Oh, no! But I liked him fairly well—as well as I could like any one after— Ah, I mean he was handsome, good-natured, and pliable. He had a fortune of his own, and another in prospect, and I considered that the match would be advantageous to me. He flirted with me outrageously when we met here in Paris, more than two years ago; he amused himself with me almost to the verge of a proposal; and when I showed him unmistakably that I might be won, he coolly dropped me and flitted away to other pleasures. But for once in his self-indulgent, luxurious life he awoke the wrong customer, and I vowed that he should pay dearly for the indignity he had offered me. From that hour to this I have relentlessly pursued him, and"—

"Oh, what an unhappy woman you must be!" exclaimed Ruth, with wonder not unminged with pity. "With such hateful elements rankling in your soul, you must be wretched beyond expression."

"Unhappy! Ha!" the girl retorted, with exceeding bitterness. "Why, for the last three years I have been almost fiend. I have not known one happy hour. Oh, Heaven! why need I eat always rise up like some grim spectre to confront me?" she burst forth, wringing her jewelled hands until their joints cracked audibly.

Then drawing in her breath with a slow, hissing sound, she made a mighty effort to pull herself together.

"Bah!" she went on. "I did not come here to act a tragedy for your benefit, but simply to tell you my news, and see how you would bear it. What do you intend to do with yourself, now that

you are left alone?" she concluded, curiously.

"I do not feel that I am accountable to you, Miss Gordon, for my movements, and I wish"—

"Ha!" sneered her companion, rudely breaking in upon her, "perhaps you think you can go back to America and palm that child off upon Mr. Plympton the elder as his nearest of kin and heir. But, my waxen-faced beauty, in order to do that you will have to prove that you were legally married to the late Ralph Plympton, and that I know you cannot do!"

Ruth made no reply to this coarse, unfeeling attack, although she grew a shade paler, if that could be possible.

She was not troubled by the stab regarding her position, however, for she felt very sure that she could prove her marriage, even though her certificate had been so strangely lost.

She intended, immediately upon her return, to go to the justice who had performed the ceremony and obtain a written statement of the fact, together with a copy of the record of the event. But she did not intend to enlighten Miss Gordon regarding these intentions, and thus she preserved a dignified silence.

"You need not stand there staring at me with those great innocent blue eyes," Inez burst forth again, irritated beyond measure because she could not disturb the strange composure which Ruth had maintained throughout the interview. "I happen to know that you are helpless to prove your marriage, and so you will never get one penny of either Ralph's or his father's money. But you are the most indifferent young widow it has ever been my lot to meet! You are like a mass of snow, and to look at you one would imagine that you did not possess one spark of love for the man who was your husband."

A strange light swept over the fair white face at this coarse taunt.

"I do not, Miss Gordon," she replied, after a moment of hesitation; "you have supposed right in this case; my love, yea, every atom of respect which I ever entertained for Ralph Plympton was slain

when, that night in Rouen, I discovered how lightly he esteemed his wife and his own honour—how weakly he had yielded to the wiles of a designing woman. Still, I was his wife; I had promised to be true to him as long as we both lived; I am the mother of his child, and I would have been faithful, I would have done all in my power to help him regain his manhood and to become worthy of the love of his child, if that had been his only offence. But he forfeited all allegiance from me when he deliberately deserted me and his helpless little one, to fly with you to Rome. He is dead—he cannot defend himself; there may have been some goad—of which I am ignorant—that drove him to the rash act; for you, who were the stronger character, have told me that you artfully planned to ruin him, out of a spirit of revenge. At the same time, whatever hold you may have had upon him, it cannot fail to weaken the love and respect of any true woman to learn that her husband had not strength of principle and manliness enough to be faithful to her under all circumstances."

Inez Gordon's face was blank as she listened to these arguments. She had known Ralph to be weak; but she had believed his dainty, pretty wife to be even weaker. She had imagined that she would shrink and cower beneath her vengeance as a sapling bends to the earth beneath the ruthless cyclone.

But the victim was proving stronger than the would-be victor, for she was able to conquer what she could not—herself!

"I am almost tempted to believe that you are glad that Ralph is dead—that you are glad to be free," she remarked, wonderingly.

"I told you I would not discuss these matters with you," said Ruth, flushing slightly; "but perhaps it will be as well to let you know just how I stand, and then perchance you will let me alone. No, I am not glad that Ralph is dead, in the sense that you mean; I am not glad to be freed from my obligations, as a wife, at the expense of his life; and yet, if he could not be true to his vows—true to himself, as a man, a husband, and a father,

I know that it is better that he should die, thus early, than to have gone on sinning, sinking lower and lower, under the degrading influence of a woman like you."

"Well, you are not afraid to speak your mind! You amaze me—to me you are the greatest puzzle in the world," Inez involuntarily exclaimed, her breath almost taken away by these plain truths which had been so calmly, yet so forcibly, hurled at her. Then she went on passionately:

"Have you no feeling? Is there no way of reaching you? Heavens! I begin to think you never really loved Ralph Plympton."

"I am afraid I did not," said Ruth, sorrowfully, but as if communing with herself rather than in response to her companion's words. "I am afraid I wronged Ralph by consenting to marry him in such haste; but I was very young—he was so determined to have his own way, and would not give me time to weigh the matter as I should have done. However"—drawing herself up proudly—"I do not know why I should tell you this."

Inez Gordon stamped her foot in a rage.

"You wretch!" she cried, in an infuriated tone, "I was so sure you would be crushed to the earth; but I will make you suffer yet! I warn you that you shall not escape my vengeance; you—What's that for?" she abruptly interposed, as Ruth stepped to the mantel-shelf and touched an electric button.

She did not reply, but stood with her head slightly bent, as if listening for something.

Presently her summons was answered by her cook, a strong, muscular woman, who had learned to love her young mistress, and who pitied her forlorn situation from the depths of her honest heart.

"Hannah, will you show this lady the way out?" Ruth quietly asked; then, without bestowing another glance upon the intruder, she walked from the room, closing the door after her.

CHAPTER XX.

"THY WILL BE DONE."

As the youthful widow passed out of her presence, Inez Gordon turned and gazed after her with astonished eyes.

Her manner was calm and dignified, yet every movement of her supple figure was replete with grace.

"When your leddyship is ready, mum," grimly suggested the cook, who still stood by the open door, with folded arms, quietly taking the measure of the haughty girl.

She flashed round upon her, a lightning-like blaze in her midnight eyes. She opened her lips as if to make some insolent retort; but something in the woman's stolid self-composure appeared to deter her, and, sweeping past her with uplifted head and disdainful mien, she left the house, entered her carriage, and was driven away.

As she turned into the main thoroughfare, from the street where Ruth resided, she started from her seat with a sudden cry, and leaned from her carriage window to watch a figure that was walking slowly towards the direction from which she had just come. "Basil!" she breathed, with a sharp accent of pain in her tone. "Good heavens! and looking like that! How he must have suffered! Ah, he is crossing the street! Is he going to her? Will he learn to love her, now that Ralph is dead?"

She clutched at the lace about her throat as she gave utterance to these disjointed sentences, as if the soft, filmy folds were producing a feeling of suffocation.

"Never, never!" she continued, her whole face ablaze with passion. "He is mine! Mine by the right of having been the one love of my life! I could not marry him; of course, I could not marry a cripple; but I loved him all the same; I love him now. Ah, Heaven, how well I love him even to this day!"

She dropped her face upon her hands and sobbed bitterly, two or three times, although no tears came to her eyes.

She did not seem able to give utterance to her thought, but sank back against

her cushions, overcome by the strength and fury of her passions.

Basil Meredith, wholly unconscious that he was watched by the woman who had once proved false to him, passed on his way, mounted the steps of Ruth Plympton's house, and rang for admittance.

Ruth would have denied herself to any one else, for her nerves were strained to their last point of endurance by her recent interview with Inez Gordon. But she had sent for him; she longed for his sympathy and advice, and for his protection from the revenging woman who seemed bound to crush her.

"Mrs. Plympton!" the man exclaimed as she entered the room and he caught sight of her pain-drawn face, her wide-staring but tearless eyes, "what new sorrow has come to you? Do not look like that, but tell me, and let me try to comfort you. I came immediately on receiving your message."

"Comfort!" repeated Ruth, in a hollow tone; "what is comfort? I wonder if I ever knew the meaning of the word?"

Her manner was very quiet, almost dull, and as she sat down near him and dropped her limp hands upon her lap, he would not have suspected, but for her terror-frozen face, that anything unusual had occurred.

"What is it, my friend?" he gently questioned. "Is the little one ill?"

"Ralph is dead," she said, abruptly, but with lips that hardly seemed to move.

"Dead! It cannot be possible!" cried Basil Meredith, aghast.

"Yes, he died in Rome the day before yesterday, of small-pox. Could anything seem more terrible—like a fearful judgment!" she said, without a muscle of her face relaxing. "Inez Gordon sent me a telegram, but it was delayed, and I had hardly read it when she came herself to tell me the shocking story."

"Did she dare to intrude upon you like that?" indignantly burst forth Mr. Meredith, a hot wave of anger mounting to his brow. "Ah," he added, sternly, "I might have known that she would dare do anything that her evil heart suggested."

Little by little he drew the whole of the shocking story from her, and was so kind,

so gentle, and sympathetic that, almost before she was aware of what she was doing, Ruth broke down and burst into tears; and blessed tears they were, too, for they relieved the dull ache at her heart, the pressure upon her brain, and unlocked the tension upon her over-strung nerves.

Then he gradually drew her thoughts into other channels by speaking of his own business arrangements, which, he was glad to tell her, were so far settled that he could leave for home somewhat earlier than he had anticipated; so, if she could be ready, they would get away from Paris within forty-eight hours.

This was very comforting to Ruth, and before he left her she had regained much of her composure, and seemed to look forward to the approaching change with a grateful sense of relief.

The next morning Mr. Meredith came again, bringing with him Madame Lintel, who was to be her travelling companion, and who seemed like a tower of strength to the young mother the moment she looked into her honest, good-natured face.

The following afternoon they all left Paris, and three days later were upon the wide-rolling Atlantic, bound for home, and—what?

That homeward voyage was very different from the outward-bound trip, little more than twelve months previous, when everything had seemed so bright and promising for the young wife. And yet, years later, when she looked back upon those eight days during which Basil Meredith cared so tenderly for her every want, she felt that to her it was but the beginning of life—real life.

She began to brighten from the first day out. Every revolution of the screw seemed to bring with it a feeling of restful content and freedom—a sense of having emerged from some chrysalis state into a different atmosphere, and upon a higher plane of life.

Basil Meredith also improved under this influence of the invigorating sea air. He seemed better than Ruth had ever seen him, except at the time of their first meeting. His face was fast taking on the hue of health, there was a new

energy in his manner, and he was gaining flesh.

• Surely the operation at the St. Antoine Hospital had proved a success in some respects, even if it had not restored to him the symmetry of his form.

But Ruth never gave a thought to his deformity now. To her he seemed the grandest, the noblest—yes, the most attractive man she had ever known.

In manner he was a perfect courtier; in intellectual attainments he far surpassed the average man; morally, although he never paraded his sentiments, she knew that he was incorruptible; while no man could have been more patient, thoughtful, or forbearing under all circumstances than he.

Doubtless these estimable attributes seemed all the more prominent to her in contradistinction with the supreme selfishness, the luxurious, indolent, and vacillating nature of Ralph. Many a time she found herself wondering how any woman could have been so insensible to the superiority of his character as to have discarded him simply on account of the slight—at least, it seemed so to her—blemish in his personal appearance, which he bore so bravely and nobly.

As the voyage drew towards its end, Ruth began to droop in spirit, in view of the separation which she knew must follow their arrival in New York, when she would go directly to Hazelwood Heights, to seek a recognition of her child and its rights from Mr. Antony Plympton, who now had no other heir, while Basil Meredith would resume his interrupted interests in that city.

Only a day or two before they were to land, she was sitting in a sheltered nook, where her friend had arranged her chair, so that she might be protected from both wind and sun.

She had been reading, but after a while her book lost its interest for her, and, dropping it upon her lap, she fell to musing sadly over the rapidly approaching parting and the uncertain future before her.

She became so absorbed in her mournful thoughts, that she was unconscious of the approach of Basil Meredith. He

stood near her for a few moments quietly regarding her, a mournfully wistful expression on his face, a look in his fine eyes that betrayed a great deal more of his feelings than he was aware of.

Finally, he laid his hand gently upon Ruth's chair, and, bending to look into her face, inquired in a low tone that vibrated strangely with some inward emotion:

"Why so thoughtful? Is there some perplexing problem on your mind that I can help you to solve?"

Ruth started, and looked quickly up into the face bending over her—that face which was now scarcely ever out of her thoughts—a vivid flush leaping to her blue-veined temples, a half-frightened expression in her lovely eyes.

As they met his, the crimson surged up and up until it was lost among the waves of her golden hair, her white lids drooped guiltily, and Basil Meredith knew, as well as if her lips had told him, that he had been the "perplexing problem" that had occupied her thoughts.

His face grew suddenly grave; lines of pain settled above his sensitive mouth; all the light and colour faded out of his countenance.

There was one brief moment of awkward silence; then Ruth laughed out nervously.

"How you startled me, Mr. Meredith!" she said. "I must, indeed, have been lost to time and sense not to have heard your step; and, as to the nature of my thoughts, I was trying to solve the problem of—the future."

She did not look up again to meet his gaze as she said this; her eyes were downcast, her lips were unsteady, and he could see that the fingers that toyed with the fringe of her robe were trembling nervously.

"Ah, you were in deep waters if you were trying to pierce that mystic veil," he returned, in strangely repressed tones, as he turned and looked, with unseeing eyes, over the wide expanse of water around them. "I—ah!—excuse me a moment—I will bring my chair."

He left her abruptly, making his way as rapidly as possible out of her sight.

"Oh!" breathed Ruth, gazing wistfully after him, "if he knew!"

Ah! if *she* had known!—if she could have seen that face almost convulsed with agony—the hopeless look in his eyes, the mighty heaving of his broad chest which he tried in vain to control!

"My God!" he murmured, as he turned the corner of the saloon on the opposite side of the vessel, and grasped the railing with a clutch that drove the blood from his nails and turned them livid, "can I live and fight *that* battle over again?"

He shook from head to foot, almost unmannered as he thus came face to face with an unexpected revelation.

"That old fancy," he went on, with pale lips, "was but the glimmer of a dim candle compared with the blazing sun at noon-day, in view of this unveiling of my heart. She is like a pure, flawless pearl—my sweet, true-hearted Ruth—my golden-haired life! *How* I love you! how you have twined yourself about my heart! and I never realized it until this moment. But I cannot—I dare not yield to the promptings of this love," he went on, a groan almost escaping him. "I have no right to clog her young life—to ask her to bind her bright, peerless beauty to an *unsightly cripple*."

He shivered sensitively as the offensive words escaped his lips, and glanced despairingly over his misshapen figure.

"And yet," he continued, a tender smile lighting his pale face, "I half believe she is beginning to care for me; but I could not—no, I have no right to ask any woman to yoke herself to such a clog. Yet we are so congenial in many ways—I could give her everything desirable, from a worldly point of view; but all that would not make up for this"—shrugging his maimed shoulder impatiently—"and I never could bear to see a look of pity and repulsion creep into those lovely eyes. Why, oh! why need it have been?"

It is impossible to express in words the pain and sorrow that were condensed into that last outburst of rebellion, as he lifted the cap from his head and wiped away the great drops that had gathered upon his brow.

Then he grew suddenly calm, his face setting into almost statuesque repose; his lips were still strangely white, but grew mournfully tremulous, while an expression of humility and resignation superseded the bitter sternness that had a moment before gleamed in his eyes.

He stood thus for a full minute, then once again he lifted his cap—this time with a gesture that was full of reverence. "Thy will be done," he murmured, and bowed his head upon his breast.

Five minutes later he went back to Ruth, the calm light of conquest in his eyes, on his lips the old luminous smile that had always charmed her.

"Did you think I was not coming?" he questioned, lightly, as he placed his chair beside her. "I was unavoidably detained for a few moments. Now let me read you something that attracted my attention this morning."

Without waiting for her assent, he unfolded a paper and began to read.

The article was an editorial that had been called forth by a strange case of healing which had been performed by a woman, who also claimed to be the discoverer of the principles that govern mental healing. It told of a man, giving the name and address, who had been afflicted with hip disease, caused by a fall when he was a boy, and who, apparently, had been raised from a death-bed, after his physicians had relinquished all hope, by the treatment of the scientist. It was an extremely interesting account, as was also the editor's comments and discussion of the comparatively new belief and practice, which were attracting a great deal of attention and investigation in certain portions of the United States, particularly in Massachusetts.

When Mr. Meredith had concluded, he turned an inquiring look upon Ruth.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"I never heard anything like it before; it is very strange. Do you imagine it is true, or is it a sensational story, written just to excite wonder?" she returned.

"It is hardly that," said her companion, in reply to her question, "for it is ably

and candidly discussed. I have previously read instances of such healing performed by this woman, but never anything so wonderful as this. It seems incredible—miraculous. I would like to talk with the man who was so strangely cured; for I wish it could be healed of this hideous deformity."

"Oh, Mr. Meredith, pray do not speak of yourself like that!" Ruth interposed, in a voice of pain, as she involuntarily put forth her hand and laid it upon his arm. "No one who knows you would ever give it a second thought."

"I wish I could be sure of that," he returned, sorrowfully. "As for myself, I feel like a blot upon the face of the earth."

Tears leaped to Ruth's eyes at this. Then she smiled up brightly through them.

"Have you noticed that *heliotrope* that is growing in the saloon?" she inquired.

"Yes, and it is glorious! Such a wealth of bloom I have never seen!" Basil Meredith replied.

"Have you observed that the *jardinière* in which it is growing is broken?"

"Yes, I saw the careless steward when he knocked the piece out."

"Does the broken vase destroy your enjoyment of the plant and its bloom? Do you ever think of it when you are inhaling the perfume it gives forth?" queried Ruth, with a shy, upward glance that conveyed a great deal more than her words.

"No, you blessed little comforter!" exclaimed her companion, as he impulsively laid his own hand upon the one that still rested upon his arm, and whose touch thrilled every fibre of his being. "And, oh, if I thought—if I dared to hope! Ah!"—springing suddenly to his feet, with a quick, indrawn breath—"there is the lunch-bell, and I know you must be hungry, for you ate scarcely any breakfast."

CHAPTER XXI.

RUTH BEARDS THE LION IN HIS DEN.

Two days later the noble steamer which had borne our friends over the broad ocean rode majestically up to her pier in New York Harbour,

Acting upon Mr. Meredith's suggestion, Ruth allowed him to escort her to a quiet hotel, where he thought it would be well for her to rest a day or so before resuming her journey.

Here they found Madame Lintel's son awaiting her, and the young mother was very loth to part from the good woman, who, being very fond of children, had relieved her greatly in the care of little Hope during the voyage.

She thanked her cordially for her kindness, and gave her some dainty and useful articles for herself and her son's wife as she bade her farewell.

Later in the day she received a message from Mr. Meredith, begging her presence in the coffee-room for a few moments.

She went immediately down to him, and was surprised to find him looking somewhat flurried and anxious.

"It is annoying to me to have to tell you, Mrs. Plympton," he said, "that I am obliged to hasten to Boston by the evening express on important business connected with our house. I regret the urgency of my early departure, as it was my intention to be at hand to render whatever assistance you may need when you leave the city to-morrow, as you have arranged."

Ruth looked dismayed for a moment; then she inquired:

"There is a boat that leaves for Albany this evening, is there not?"

"Yes, about six, I believe."

"Then I am sure it will be best for me to go on at once, rather than wait another day. I know nothing about New York, and should feel very lonely to remain here overnight, knowing I had not a friend in the city."

"In that case I could see you safely and comfortably settled on the boat before my own departure," Mr. Meredith returned, with a look of relief.

"I do not think I ought to trouble you," said Ruth, studying her friend's face anxiously; "you have cares of your own now."

"Indeed, I haven't anything to do, except to purchase my ticket," he smilingly returned; "and even if I had, I should see you aboard the boat. I wish

"I could attend you to your journey's end," he gravely concluded.

"Pray do not be troubled about me," Ruth responded. "As soon as I reach Albany I am practically at home, and know every inch of ground."

"Then, if you decide to start this evening—which I myself think would be advisable under the circumstances—I will have your trunks forwarded immediately to the landing; and then, as we have several hours before the boat leaves, suppose we take Miss Hope for her first drive in the park?" Mr. Meredith proposed.

Ruth readily accepted this invitation, and they were soon on their way up town towards the fashionable pleasure park of the city.

They rode most of the afternoon, and though they kept up a brisk conversation during the entire drive, both were oppressed with a feeling of deep sorrow in view of the approaching separation.

They went directly to the pier after their drive, and, when he had escorted Ruth to her state-room and arranged everything possible for her comfort, Mr. Meredith led the way to the saloon—little Hope being sound asleep—for a few moments' chat before bidding her a last good bye and going ashore.

"How strange," Ruth remarked, to break an awkward silence that seemed to fall upon them all at once, "that our first meeting should have been upon a steamer, and now our parting occurs under similar circumstances!"

Basil Meredith smiled, but there was much of sadness in the effort.

"Yes," he said, "but I do not for a moment apprehend that this parting is to be final; of course we shall meet again, and many times, I trust. But, Mrs. Plympton, I want you to promise me that if you are ever in trouble—if you ever have need of me, no matter how trifling the emergency—you will let me know at once."

"Thank you, my friend," Ruth returned, deeply moved; "I cannot refuse to give a promise so kindly solicited, and I shall never forget how good you have been to me throughout all my trouble, nor cease to be grateful!"

"Hush! do not let the word gratitude come between you and me," her companion interposed, with gentle reproach. "If debt there is at all, the burden of it rests upon me, for I do not forget how a certain little lady came, like a ray of sunshine and hope, to cheer me at a time when hope was well-nigh dead. Your visits, Ruth, were the one comfort I had during all those weary months that I lay in the hospital."

"I am very glad," Ruth replied, but flushing at the sound of her name, as it almost unconsciously fell from his lips for the first time; "I wish I could have gone to you oftener."

Again that unaccountable silence fell over them, and was only broken by the clanging of a bell, which brought them both to their feet with a swift, wistful glance into each other's eyes.

"That means that I must go," said Basil, holding out his hand.

In spite of all that he could do, that strong hand trembled and his lips were rigid from the effort at self-control that he was trying to exercise; for, looking down into that beautiful face, he found it almost more than he could do to say good-bye without betraying the mighty love that had taken possession of him.

Without a word, Ruth laid her hand upon his palm. She could not speak, for a sob was just ready to choke her, and two great glittering drops did escape and roll over her cheeks.

The man's fingers closed over hers with a strong, lingering clasp; the next moment he was gone, and she was alone.

The next morning, on her arrival in Albany, Ruth took a carriage and drove directly to the home of the woman to whom Ralph had taken her, to spend the night, previous to their departure.

Mrs. Barstow, although she had been very fond of Ralph during her residence with the Plympton family, had wisely advised the young couple to do nothing rashly; but when she found that her counsels were not heeded, she kindly did what she could for them, and then let them go, with her blessing.

She was greatly shocked now to learn of

the young man's death, and received Ruth with true motherliness, while she expressed herself as "delighted to have a baby in the house."

She shook her head sagely, however, when the young mother informed her of her plan to go to Mr. Plympton and seek the recognition of Hope as his grandchild.

"You don't know him; he'll never look at either of you," she said.

Nevertheless, Ruth was determined to put her fate to the test, and, leaving Hope with her good friend, she started forth for Mr. Grant's office, to arm herself with proofs of her marriage.

Her dismay can better be imagined than described when, upon arriving at the place where the building had been, she found only a vacant lot and some workmen employed laying the foundations of new buildings.

She went into the nearest store to make some inquiries, when, to her horror, she learned of the tragedy which had occurred there a few months previous.

The blow almost stunned her. The justice dead—the records burned! How was she ever to prove her marriage?

Suddenly it came to her that a clerk in the office had witnessed the ceremony. If she could find him, all yet might be well.

She did not know his name, however, and could only make inquiries for him as "Mr. Grant's clerk."

She was asked which clerk—the justice had employed there—and this was the climax of her dilemma, and she felt that her task was well-nigh hopeless.

She returned to Mrs. Barstow's bitterly disappointed and discouraged, for the time being. But Ruth had learned something of resolution and self reliance during the last year, and, knowing that Ralph had acknowledged her as his wife in his correspondence with his father, she bravely decided to go directly to Mr. Plympton, tell her story, and claim protection and support for herself and her child.

Acting upon this resolve, she arrayed little Hope in her daintiest garments, while, out of respect for the father's

feelings—for Ruth had assumed no garb of mourning—she donned a rich but plain costume of black, and then drove out to Hazelwood Heights, the splendid home of the Plymptons, which, if justice was done, would eventually descend to her daughter.

"Yes, Mr. Plympton is at home," the servant told her—a strange servant, whom she had never seen, she was glad to observe—and ushered her into a reception-room to wait while she took her card to the master of the house.

Poor Ruth sank upon the nearest chair, trembling with excitement, to await events.

Presently she heard a door bang ominously, then a step in the hall, her heart leaping into her throat as she recognized it.

The next moment Anthony Plympton stood before her in the doorway, while it was with difficulty that she suppressed a cry of fear as she looked into his stern, passion-lined face.

He entered the room and shut the door. For an instant his glance rested curiously upon the sleeping child, which Ruth had deposited in a great Turkish rocker. Then his face hardened, and, turning his cold gaze upon Ruth, he harshly demanded:

"Well, miss, what are you here for?"

A hot wave of colour swept up to Ruth's brow at his insolent way of addressing her, for it plainly told her that he had no intention of acknowledging her as the wife of his son.

"Mr. Plympton," she said, rising and turning to him with a graceful assumption of matronly dignity, "I know that you are very angry with me because of my marriage with your son; and—and perhaps it was a mistake on his part as well as on my own; but, however that may be, it is too late to remedy the evil, for I have come back to America alone, to tell you—to tell you—that!"

"That my son is dead. I know that already," the man interposed, in a metallic tone, as she faltered over the sad tidings.

"You know it!" gasped Ruth, astonished.

"Yes; I received a cablegram three days ago, informing me of the fact."

Ruth grew pale as death at this information. It flashed upon her that Inez Gordon must have sent the communication, and doubtless this was a step towards the accomplishment of her threat that she would "yet make her suffer;" that she "should not escape her vengeance."

"I am glad that you were somewhat prepared for my sad news," she said, gently, after a moment; "but do you know how Ralph died?"

"No, I do not know how my son died," the man returned, with cold emphasis. "Tell me, if you choose, but give me facts, not sentiment."

Ruth shuddered at his coarseness and his inhumanity.

But, obeying him literally, she ignored all sentiment, and began to give him a brief account of what had occurred since her marriage.

She spoke as considerably as she could in telling him how her husband had deserted her and her child, in their sore need. She did not wish to wound the proud man more than was necessary, by rehearsing the faithlessness and degradation of his son; but she had been commanded to give him "facts" rather than "sentiment," and thus she rigidly adhered to her text throughout her recital.

Yet, despite the delicacy of her language, the man could not fail to understand that the boasted heir of the house of Plympton, the pride and idol of his heart, had been a coward and a knave of the deepest dye.

"When I learned that he was dead," Ruth finally remarked, when her story was told, "I knew that there was but one course for me to pursue—to come back to America and ask your protection for myself and my child." When Ralph went to Rome, he left me five hundred dollars, and much of that I was obliged to use in settling bills and to pay my passage home. Consequently, I have almost nothing to depend upon for my own and baby's support."

"And so you have come to me, expecting that I will receive you as the wife of

my son! You have brought that child here, believing that I would acknowledge it as my—heir?" demanded the proud man, in a voice that was hoarse with suppressed passion.

"I hoped, sir, that you would at least feel something of compassion and humanity for us in our unfortunate situation," Ruth replied, with gentle dignity. "Yes, and I also expected," she added, with a little flash of spirit in her beautiful eyes, "that you would lend me your aid in securing the income from the fortune which now rightfully belongs to your son's little daughter."

The man started at this intimation of her knowledge of what was her due. Then he flushed an angry crimson at what he regarded as her insolent presumption—she, a nobody, a beggar, demanding her rights as an equal of him, a Plympton!

"Ah, so that is your plan!" he remarked, after a moment of consideration. "Then, of course, you have brought your proofs to establish your claim to Mr. Ralph Plympton's private fortune?"

"Alas! no—I have no proofs," truthfully confessed our conscientious Ruth, but nervously interlacing her slender fingers as she gazed into the adamant face before her. "My certificate was lost in New York, on the very day of our marriage, and I learned only this morning that Mr. Grant—the justice who performed the ceremony—perished in the fire that also destroyed the record of the transaction."

"Ah, and so Nat Grant did that job! If he were living, I should owe him a grudge for serving me such a trick!" Mr. Plympton remarked, with an ugly curl of his upper lip. "But I suppose there were witnesses?" he added, with ill-concealed anxiety.

"There was one," replied poor, unwary Ruth, "a clerk; but I do not know his name, and so I have been unable to get any trace of him."

"Ahem!"—it was an ejaculation of cruel satisfaction that fell upon the listener's heart like the blow of a hammer—"then I am unable to see how you can prove the position you have claimed, miss," Anthony Plympton retorted, in a

voice of triumph, "and allow me to inform you that I repudiate you, utterly; also, that the private fortune of Mr. Ralph Plympton, in default of direct issue, goes to his nearest of kin—myself."

CHAPTER XXII.

A FORTUNATE EXPERIMENT.

Ruth stood staring blankly at the man for a moment after his repudiation of her, and his exultant affirmation that he, as the nearest of kin, would inherit her husband's private fortune. She had not expected a cordial reception for herself, but for the sake of her beautiful and helpless babe she had hoped that she would at least have been tolerated and allowed an income sufficient to secure for them the comforts of life.

"You repudiate me? You will not acknowledge me as your son's wife?" she finally exclaimed, proudly. "Believe me, I never would have given you the opportunity had not my hands been tied in a way to prevent my earning my own living. But will you repudiate her?" she continued, pointing to the sleeping infant, all her motherhood aroused to battle for the rights of her child? "will you turn coldly away from that helpless baby, who is your own and only grandchild—your only heir? I am unfortunate, I admit, in not being able to prove my marriage to your son; but you cannot fail to know that I was his lawful wife, for, to my certain knowledge, letters mentioning the fact have passed between you and him. I have tried to wound you as little as possible in relating to you the story of his desertion of me, but it is nevertheless the fact that he proved himself culpably recreant to responsibilities which he was most insistent upon assuming. Consequently it is only right and just that you should assist me in obtaining at least a portion of the income of the fortune which now rightly belongs to my child."

"I cannot help you, madam," the man coldly replied. "If my son deserted you, as you claim, he doubtless had good reasons for doing so, and since you used your blandishments to lure him into this

discreditable connection with you, you must now suffer the consequences."

"And you utterly refuse to aid me!" Ruth exclaimed, straightening herself and looking him steadily in the eye.

"I utterly refuse to aid you," he repeated. "Even if my son really married you—which you can produce no proof of his having done—he so disgraced himself and his family by uniting himself with one so low-born that I will never acknowledge the connection. You can go now," he rudely added; "I am exceedingly busy, as I leave to-night for Paris to ascertain what further facts I may regarding the sad fate of my son."

He turned abruptly, and would have left the room, but Ruth stepped between him and the door, confronting him with blazing eyes and scarlet cheeks.

"Low-born!" she cried, spiritedly. "You do not know what you are saying; for let me assure you that some of the best blood of England flows in my veins, and something tells me that the day will yet come when I shall be able to prove it to the world. I believe, also, that I shall be able to establish my position as the lawful wife of Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton. You are a cold, hard man, Mr. Plympton, with a pride as despicable as it is false; but, if I live, I will not only confirm the claim of this child"—she lifted the beautiful sleeping babe as she spoke—"to her father's fortune, but prove to all who know you that she is a Plympton of the Plymptons."

She did not wait to observe the effect of her words, but sweeping by the "lord of the manor" with a proud and dignified bearing, she left the room and the house, while Anthony Plympton gazed after her with a look of astonishment mingled with undisguised admiration.

"By Jove! she's as pretty as a picture, and I never would have believed she was such a plucky little thing," he muttered, shoving his hands in his pockets and striking a meditative attitude.

He looked worn and haggard, too, for, in spite of his anger and displeasure over his son's marrying a "low-born seamstress," he had loved and built his hopes upon him, and his death had been a ter-

rible blow to his plans and his pride. That evening he left Hazelwood Heights for New York, and two days later sailed for Europe.

Poor Ruth, meantime, was almost in despair in view of the forlorn prospect before her. She had but very little money left, and it seemed as if beggary would soon stare her in the face. She was still an inmate of the humble home of Mrs. Barstow, who was very kind to her, and who was fast becoming attached to little Hope.

But the good woman could not afford to board them without remuneration, and Ruth knew that she must soon decide upon some course of action.

She could write to Basil Meredith, tell him how she was situated, and he would smooth all difficulties from her path. But Ruth was very proud, in spite of her gentleness, and her pride would not allow her to appeal to him in her poverty; and, besides, she could not bring herself to confess to him her failure to establish her position as the lawful wife of Ralph Plympton.

She knew that she could go into some family as seamstress, for there were plenty of Mrs. Plympton's friends who had envied that lady her services, and who would have been only too glad to secure her skill and taste.

But the pay of a seamstress was very small, the days long, the work very confining, and she could not make up her mind to leave her child to the care of any one else; while she well knew that she would not be allowed to take her with her. So this plan did not seem feasible.

But something must be done to keep the wolf from the door.

It was a perplexing problem, and it caused her several sleepless nights and anxious days.

Mrs. Barstow was kind and sympathetic, but she was unable to suggest any practical solution to the question, although she told Ruth not to worry, for she was "welcome to stay there as long as she liked. Mr. Ralph had done her many a good turn in the past, and she was that fond of the baby it was just a pleasure to have one in the house."

But our independent little woman could not owe her support to a hard-working woman, who did fine washing and ironing for a living.

Finally, after careful consideration, she resolved to try an experiment, and open a small millinery establishment in the suburb of Albany, where there was no local milliner.

The autumn season was drawing near, and, if she could get the right class of trade, she believed that she could support herself very comfortably in this way, for she knew that there was a large profit in the business.

She feared that it might prove a rash undertaking, since the city was so accessible; but, remembering the old adage, "No hing venture, nothing win," she resolved to make the trial, for *something* she must do, and that right speedily.

She had less than a hundred dollars in money, but she had some expensive jewellery, the sale of one piece of which would bring her enough to test her scheme, and if she failed she would still have the remainder of her jewels to fall back upon and try something else. She also had a number of very dainty Paris hats; for Ralph had always insisted upon her having a hat to match every costume, and some of these she had worn only two or three times, some not at all.

They were stylish and expensive, and she shrewdly determined to make them the basis of her experiment.

She hired a couple of rooms in a good locality, furnishing her show-room inexpensively, but tastefully; the other—her bedroom and living room all in one—with what was barely necessary for comfort.

Then, leaving Hope with Mrs. Barstow, she made a trip to New York, where she selected a small stock of choice goods, visited several shops to obtain ideas and information regarding certain points upon which she was ignorant, returning to Albany at the close of the second day, feeling like a general upon the eve of an important battle.

She made a few changes in her Paris hats to render them appropriate for the season; trimmed a few others to cater

to people who could not afford such expensive headgear, and then put out her artistic sign, with one charming *chapeau*, together with two or three sprays of costly flowers, in a glass case outside her door as an advertisement.

A week went by and she had not had a single customer, although many a passer-by paused to inspect the contents of the show case and gaze curiously in the window.

Poor Ruth became almost disheartened over the apparent failure of her scheme. Her face grew thin and careworn, her appetite failed, and her pillow at night was wet with despairing tears.

But one morning, a handsome carriage, drawn by a pair of fine horses, stopped before her door, when an elegantly-dressed and distinguished-looking woman descended and entered her show-room.

"Ah!" she breathed in a tone of satisfaction as she glanced around the room, then at Ruth in her stylish costume—for she had wisely resolved to carry out, in her own appearance, the foreign atmosphere of her establishment—"really, madam, there is quite an air of France about your sale-room!"

She then informed Ruth that she had been hastily summoned away from home; she was to leave that afternoon, and had no time to go to the city to her own milliner for a hat. She had therefore decided to drop in there to see if she could find anything that would answer her purpose.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise when Ruth—with remarkable *sang froid*, considering that her eager heart was thumping like a trip-hammer, in view of this possible customer—informed her that she had just returned from Paris, and most of her hats were importations from that fashionable centre.

This assurance was easily proven, since the address of the Parisian milliners, some of whom were personally known to the lady, was stamped upon the silken linings.

In less than fifteen minutes she had selected and paid for one of the most expensive among those displayed, Ruth feeling perfectly justified in charging just

what the hat had cost her, since she had never worn it.

Mrs. Dalton—that was the name her customer gave her—also gave an order for something more simple, for shopping expeditions to the city, and this was to be finished and sent home at Ruth's convenience, as she would be away for a week.

"I shall come again," she smilingly remarked on leaving, "for, truly, I have not seen such a unique display in a long time. I will tell my friends also," she added, kindly, as she saw the eager light that leaped into Ruth's eyes, and surmised the cause, "for it will be a great convenience to be able to obtain something really nice and pretty, without having to go to the city upon every occasion. I congratulate you, Mrs. Plympton, upon having excellent taste."

Ruth's heart leaped for joy as she smilingly bowed her customer out and watched her drive away.

The hat she had sold had cost her ninety francs, or eighteen dollars, and now she had the money back again, neatly folded in her purse. She felt rich, for the thing would have been of no use to her in her present condition, while the price of it would pay her rent for two months.

Surely, though she had waited long for a turn in Fortune's wheel, this seemed to be an omen of success to her. And so it proved; for in less than a week she had more orders than she could fill single-handed and attend to her other duties; thus she was obliged to engage a young girl to take care of Hope, and another to assist her in her business.

She was also obliged to increase her stock. She made her room just as attractive as possible, keeping it immaculately clean, and always received her customers in some charming costume that had a decidedly French air; consequently she secured a high class of patronage, and in this way soon found herself quite famous, often being referred to as "that little French milliner in Main-street."

When the season was over and she took account of stock, she was surprised to find how much she had made.

She immediately established a bank

A BRAVE GIRL.

account, or rather two accounts—one a reserve fund, entered in the name of Hope; the other a deposit for business purposes, to be used to enlarge her facilities for the approaching spring season.

Then there came a lull, when she felt that she was justly entitled to the rest before her, so, dismissing her girls, she gave herself up to the care and enjoyment of her darling, who was truly a "well-spring of pleasure" and a great comfort to her.

She had February and March almost wholly to herself; with the exception of some work for two or three families, who were obliged to go into mourning, she had nothing to do.

Accordingly she improved the time in doing her own and Hope's sewing for spring and summer, so that she would have nothing to interfere with her business when the season opened. April came in with a mild and balmy atmosphere—harbinger of an "early season," and, determined to be prepared to meet it, so as to retain all her custom, Ruth had some pretty cards printed, and sent them round, naming a date when she would be prepared to show her new styles.

Then one bright morning she started for New York, leaving Hope with Mrs. Barstow, to purchase her spring goods.

On leaving Albany, she procured a morning paper to while away a portion of her long ride, and almost the first thing that attracted her attention upon unfolding it was the following announcement:

MARRIED.—In Paris, March 18, 18—, Anthony Plympton, Esq., of Albany, N.Y., U.S.A., to Miss Inez Gordon, of Paris.

Following this notice there was a short editorial comment, referring pleasantly to the marriage, and inferring that the public would be gratified to learn that the Hon. Mr. Plympton would soon return with his bride to his home at Hazelwood Heights, which was already undergoing repairs, and being refurnished to receive the happy couple. It was also stated that, as the lady of his choice was said to

be beautiful, accomplished, and wealthy, the gentleman was to be congratulated upon the new relations he had assumed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ANOTHER PAGE FROM THE RECORD OF A VINDICTIVE WOMAN.

After reading the startling item of news recorded in the last chapter, the paper slipped from Ruth's nerveless fingers, and fell rustling to the floor.

So this was the way that Inez Gordon had taken to fulfil her threat that she "would yet make her feel her vengeance."

As she had fascinated the son with her arts and wiles, so now the father, only with greater success; for he had married her, and she would henceforth be mistress of his splendid home, and reap the benefit of his wealth—even including Ralph's private fortune—which ought rightfully to have descended to little Hope.

Of course, Ruth knew that she was powerless to change matters in the least; the deed was done; she could prove nothing, and she must patiently submit to her fate.

But it was none the less bitter, for all that, to feel assured that the unprincipled woman who had succeeded in ruining her life had now, with deliberate purpose, as she believed, also planned this *coup de grace* for her devoted head.

"How strange it is that people of their stamp should be allowed to prosper!" she murmured, with a bitter pang at her heart. "There is no justice in such prosperity. However"—with an independent toss of her pretty head—"since I am capable of taking care of myself, and am in no way accountable to them, I will not trouble about them."

Nevertheless, in spite of this resolve, she watched the papers closely in order to ascertain the future movements of the newly-wedded couple, and ere long saw an announcement to the effect that the residence at Hazelwood Heights was fully completed, and only awaiting the return of the travellers.

Two weeks later there appeared the announcement of their arrival, together

with a glowing description of a reception that had followed for the purpose of introducing the new Mrs. Plympton to the many friends of her husband.

These occurrences, however, caused only a ripple of bitterness and annoyance to Ruth, who was too deeply immersed in her own rapidly-increasing business to grow morbid over them.

She sincerely hoped that she would never meet either Mr. or Mrs. Plympton, and was almost sorry that she had started her business so near the home of her husband's father, and the scene of the romance that for her had ended so sadly.

Still she resolved to go on the even tenor of her way; possibly, now that Inez had succeeded in her scheme, and was queening it in the home that should have been hers, she would be satisfied with her triumph and let her alone.

She heard occasionally from Mr. Meredith, who wrote that he was very busy, and was obliged to travel a great deal, as he had interests which kept him between New York and Boston.

He seemed to take it for granted that her own life was full of peace and content; that she had no especial cares or anxieties; for she had never told him anything about that terrible interview with Ralph's father, or that she was obliged to toil for the support of herself and her little one.

The summer passed, and she continued to prosper; her success had been so marked and her future seemed so promising, that she felt justified in taking a small house and making a more comfortable home for herself.

She also indulged in a servant to look after her domestic affairs and care for Hope when she was busy or obliged to be away.

Then she purchased a dog, to serve both as a playfellow for Hope and as the protector of her small household at night; for she often had a considerable sum of money by her, and was timid lest some burglar should be tempted to molest her.

The dog was a handsome collie—a faithful, intelligent creature, which at once became greatly attached to his mistress and the child, and seemed instinc-

tively to know just what his mission was in the house.

"Rex," she called him, and, indeed, in some respects he was monarch of all he surveyed.

All customers and friends were allowed to pass the portals unmolested, but he exercised great discernment and discretion whenever an objectionable person chanced to put in an appearance, and stood a relentless sentinel to guard the portal.

Ruth was really quite happy during this summer; she was prosperous; her little one was thriving beautifully; her own health was perfect, and her life unfettered by any disagreeable care or trouble. She had never seen either Mr. Anthony Plympton or his wife—she rarely gave a thought to them, and yet she experienced a sense of relief when she read in a paper, early in September, that they would soon close their house and start for the far West, with the intention of spending the winter in Southern California.

The autumn passed—another thriving season for Ruth—the Christmas holidays drew on apace, when, one morning, she read, with a suddenly blanching face, that Anthony Plympton was dead!

He had died at Pasadena, of a stroke of apoplexy. At noon he had apparently been as well as usual; in less than four hours all that remained on earth of the rich man was a lifeless form of clay.

A week later his body was brought back to Albany, and laid with great pomp and ceremony beside his first wife, while his widow gave expression to her grief (?) by enveloping herself in heavy bombazine, many yards of crape, together with the use of deeply-bordered handkerchiefs and stationery.

Not long afterwards it was reported that the residence at Hazelwood Heights was closed, and that Mrs. Plympton was spending the winter somewhere in sorrowful seclusion.

* * * * *

The New York World of January 31st contained the following advertisement:

WANTED.—A male infant, not over a fortnight old; must be attractive, healthy, and of re-

spectable parentage. An excellent home and great advantages await such a child. Apply at No. —, West Sixty-seventh-street, on Wednesday, from 2 to 4 p.m.

On the afternoon of the next day but one, which was Wednesday, a motley company were admitted, one by one, to the reception-room of a quietly elegant residence, No. —, West Sixty-seventh-street.

With one exception, they were all women, each bearing in her arms a young infant.

The exception was an awkward, plain-faced boy of about thirteen or fourteen years. He was poorly but neatly dressed, and appeared much older than he looked.

In his arms he also bore a tiny form, that was enveloped in numerous wrappings, which he carefully removed until he came to a very common, but immaculately clean, blanket.

The child he held was evidently fast asleep, but, considering his age and sex, the lad handled it very dexterously, although he flushed a vivid crimson as he glanced round him and encountered the curious gaze of his companions.

One by one, however, they were ushered, by a middle-aged woman, into an adjoining room, while he sat still and patiently awaited his turn, evidently assuming that since he had come last he would be served last.

As no one returned to the room, it was evident that the applicants were ushered out by some other way, and the boy was finally left alone.

At last the servant came to tell him that he was wanted.

He arose, with a grave, self-contained air, to follow her.

As she opened the door of an adjoining room, he caught sight of a proud, beautiful woman, clad in a robe of spotless cashmere, her white, slender hands flashing with gems, a mass of black hair crowning her haughty head, while two coal-black eyes instantly fastened themselves on his face with a look which made him draw in a quick, startled breath.

The woman looked as if she had been ill, for she was very pale, and leaned languidly back in her chair, as if the ex-

citement of the afternoon had wearied her.

"Well, boy," she abruptly remarked, while she sharply eyed her new visitor, "what have you there?"

The lad started at the sound of her voice, shot another sweeping look into her face, and then, flushing a vivid crimson, responded, with averted eyes:

"A baby, marm."

"Humph! how came you to bring me a baby?"

With his eyes fixed upon the carpet, the youth replied:

"My mother is dying, marm; the baby was born two weeks yesterday; we saw the advertisement in the paper, and thought if we could find a good home for him, it would be the best thing we could do."

"Have you a father?"

"No, marm; he was killed by a trolley car, in Brooklyn, more'n three months ago."

"What is your name?"

"Will Browning."

"Well, that's a good-sounding name; but how am I to know that you are telling me the truth?" queried the lady.

The lad shifted his burden to one arm, then, diving his hand into a pocket, brought forth a folded paper, which he held out to the maid, who passed it to her mistress.

The lady opened it and read:

I am the daughter of a college professor, but upon marrying contrary to my parents' wishes, became estranged from them. They are both dead, and I have no other near relatives. My husband became a drunkard, although he also belonged to a good family. I am dying from hardship and overwork. I saw your advertisement, and send you my child, hoping he may perhaps be fortunate enough to secure the "good home" referred to—otherwise he must go to some institution. If you take him, bring him up to be a good man,

ALICE TAFT BROWNING.

The note showed evidences of culture, in spite of the tremulous and almost illegible writing.

The woman read it through thoughtfully a second time, then laid it aside.

"Bring the baby here!" she briefly commanded; and again the boy started, as if a lash had stung him. He advanced,

however, and laid his burden in her lap.

With an eager gleam of curiosity in her great black eyes, she removed the blanket from the child, when almost involuntarily a low cry of mingled surprise and gratification escaped her.

"Oh, what a beautiful child!" she exclaimed; and surely she was justified in her praise, for the infant was indeed a fine-looking boy for his age.

He was a little specimen of perfect health, with a dark skin, black hair and brows, while his eyes, which at that moment he opened, were also as bright and dark as those gazing so curiously upon him.

He was very coarsely dressed, but every article was whole, and faultlessly clean.

"Do you want to give the baby away?" the woman inquired, as she studied the boy's grave face.

He lifted his eyes to hers for an instant, a frown contracting his brow, then replied:

"We've got to give him away. Mother's dying, and there is nobody to take care of him. I'd like to have the little thing find a good home."

"Well, if I take him, he will not only have a good home, but also become the heir to a great fortune," the woman proudly interposed.

The boy did not appear to be properly impressed by this somewhat boastful statement, for he retorted, while he flashed a quick glance of dislike into the dark, brilliant face before him:

"Well, but will you be good to him?"

The lady flushed angrily; there was something in the tone and manner of the boy that appeared to nettle her exceedingly.

"Since he will be my adopted son, it isn't likely that he will be abused," she haughtily responded. "Did your mother authorize you to leave the child with me to-day?" she added, coldly.

"Yes; she said if I—I liked your face, and thought you'd be kind to him, I"—he began, with some confusion.

"Well, do you like my face?—do you approve of me?" the woman sneeringly

interrupted, but looking a trifle amused as well.

Will Browning flushed again painfully, and a resentful spark gleamed in his eyes, while the hand that held his cap behind him was so tightly clinched that the nails were purple.

"Why don't you answer me?" the lady sharply demanded, becoming impatient at his hesitation.

"You—you are very beautiful, marm," he evasively replied, in a low tone.

"Thank you," was the mocking rejoinder. "Well," she continued, "I like the looks of the child; I have seen no other to-day that has pleased me so well; so, if you approve of me sufficiently to leave him with me, I will keep him."

The lad glanced regretfully at his little brother.

"It's got to be; there's no other way," he said, slowly.

"Have you any other brothers or sisters?" the woman inquired.

"No; there were three others, but they died."

"Well, I think I will keep the baby; you may leave him."

"Yes, marm; and mother told me to ask your name."

"That is something that you cannot know," was the frowning reply. "If you give me the child, you give him unconditionally; you are to know nothing about him, from this hour; he is to be mine—my son—my heir. If you are satisfied with such an arrangement, leave him; if not, take him, and go home at once."

"I'll leave him," said the lad, briefly, after a moment of hesitation; then lifting one corner of the blanket, he gently covered the child's face, and, turning, walked from the room as if eager to be gone.

He paused a moment in the outer apartment to dash some tears from his cheeks, then, looking back, he shook a trembling fist at the door he had just closed after him.

He came near being caught in this act, however, for the maid suddenly appeared before him, with a sealed envelope in her hand.

"You are to take this to your mother," she said, passing it to him.

A BRAVE GIRL.

He took it, thrust it deep into his pocket, and then followed her through the hall to the outer door.

As the girl opened this to let him out, they were confronted by the postman, who had just come up the steps.

He was in the act of handing the servant some letters, when one slipped to the floor.

Will Browning stooped to recover it, and, while doing so, his quick eye had taken in the superscription.

It was addressed, in a bold, plain hand, to "Mrs. Anthony Plympton."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. ANTHONY PLYMPTON MAKES AN ANNOYING DISCOVERY.

A fortnight previous to the events recorded in our last chapter, Mrs. Anthony Plympton had given birth to a male infant, but after a feeble, gasping breath or two, the flickering flame of life went suddenly out, and she was childless. Thus vital interests, which she had confidently hoped that maternity would settle in her favour, were jeopardized.

But the Plympton estate and the Plympton millions were worth scheming for, particularly as there was a chance of their falling into the hands of a hated rival; hence the advertisement which had appeared in the *New York World*, and which had resulted in securing an heir who, she fondly hoped, would give her the control of the property for many years to come.

* * * * *

The *Albany Argus* of February 3 announced that on January 17, in the city of New York, a son and heir had been born to the late Anthony Plympton.

The paper also stated that Mrs. Plympton had been quietly spending the winter in the great metropolis, but when spring opened she would return to Hazelwood Heights, where she would reside permanently. It was also stated that the young heir had been named after his father.

When Ruth read this bit of news, she was temporarily depressed by it, for she could not fail to experience a feeling of

bitterness in view of the fact that her worst enemy and her son were usurping not only the property which her child should have shared, but also the private fortune that had been left in trust for her.

Still she realized her utter inability to right the wrong, and so, perforce, must submit to the inevitable.

When spring came, Hazelwood Heights were again thrown open; a corps of servants were installed there to put everything in order; new horses and carriages were purchased, and put in charge of a liveried coachman and footman, and then Mrs. Anthony Plympton and her French maid, with her infant and his nurse, took possession of the splendid establishment.

It was evident that Mrs. Plympton intended to enjoy to the utmost her magnificent home, her handsome income, and her freedom; for, although she paid her late husband the respect of still wearing the deepest mourning, she nevertheless spent his money with a lavish hand, entertained numerous friends, went about a great deal with much style and flourish, and, on the whole, gave every one the impression of being a charming and self-satisfied young widow, who was by no means inconsolable over her loss.

One morning in June, Ruth, with little Hope, went out into the tiny garden at the side of the house, to train a running rose upon a new trellis which she had had set up for it.

She became deeply absorbed in her work, and, supposing the gate in front of the house to be fastened, paid no attention to her little one, who was in the habit of playing about the yard by herself.

Even when the sound of hoofs and the rolling wheels told her that a carriage was approaching, she did not look up or pause in what she was doing until she heard Rex give a sharp, quick bark, saw him rush like mad by her, leap the fence, and bound into the middle of the street.

The next moment a piercing shriek of mingled pain and fear almost paralyzed her brain and heart. There was a word of hoarse command, followed by the tramp-

A BRAVE GIRL.

ling and prancing of horses suddenly checked; then—she never knew how she managed it—she found herself outside the fence, clasping her child to her breast, while she tried to soothe her frightened sobbings and assure herself that she was unharmed.

There was not even a scratch or bruise to be found on little Hope, who doubtless owed her life to the watchfulness and timely interference of Rex. He, however, had not been a moment too soon in reaching her and dragging her out of danger. All the harm that had been done was in soiling her dainty attire, while the pretty lawn hat had been swept under and crushed out of all shape by the wheels of the carriage.

Having satisfied herself that Hope was uninjured, Ruth turned to see who had so nearly run down her darling, and beheld Inez Gordon Plympton sitting proudly erect in her elegant landau, a sneer curling her red lips, while on the seat in front of her was a nurse, with the Plympton heir in her arms.

The coachman, a staid and respectable-looking man, was pale, and considerably agitated over what had occurred, although he was not in the least to blame, the child having started to run across the street when he was almost upon her. The sagacious dog alone had saved her from being trampled to death.

"I hope she is not hurt, marm," the man remarked, as he respectfully touched his hat to Ruth.

Before she could find voice to answer him, his mistress leaned over the side of the carriage, and, addressing her in a low, sibilant voice, said:

"So this is where you have been hiding for so long? Ha!"—glancing at the prettily-draped bay window, where several jauntily-trimmed hats were displayed—"and so you have turned milliner to get your living?"

Then, as her roving eye caught sight of the sign over the door, she straightened herself haughtily.

"Andrew, open the door for me!" she imperiously commanded; "I wish to get out."

The obsequious footman was on the

ground in an instant, holding the door wide open for her to descend.

"Now you can drive on, Thomas," she added, addressing the coachman, "but return for me in about ten or fifteen minutes. Marie, hold your parasol lower over Master Anthony!"

The carriage passed slowly on, and Mrs. Plympton approached and entered the little garden plot surrounding the cottage, whither Ruth had retreated, with little Hope still in her arms.

The lovely child, finding herself safe once more, had ceased crying, and was gazing wonderingly at the black-robed stranger who had so unceremoniously invaded her home.

The arrogant woman bore herself with a haughty, supercilious air, and there was an angry gleam in her eyes which betrayed that something had occurred to arouse her ire.

Going close up to Ruth, who was watching her with some surprise, but with a composure which indicated that she had no intention of being either brawled at or insulted upon her own premises, she said, in a voice that was vibrant with passion, while she pointed to the sign over the door of the cottage:

"How dare you blazon that name so publicly? I will not have it—I will not have my eyes so offended as I drive through the street; you must take it down! Do you hear? You are to take it down this very day!"

"Really, Mrs. Plympton, you are overstepping all bounds of decency," Ruth calmly replied. "You have no right to issue such commands to me, and I shall not remove the name which so offends you. It belongs to me by every moral and legal right."

"You shall!" retorted Inez, with an imperative stamp of her shapely foot. "The next I shall know you will be claiming relationship with me."

"Pray do not be troubled, Mrs. Plympton," Ruth responded, a smile of amusement flitting over her lips; "that would be the very last thing that I should think of doing. I am entitled to my name, however, for I was the lawful wife of Ralph Plympton"—

"You cannot prove that," rudely interrupted her companion, but with a note of uneasiness in her tone.

"No, I cannot, unfortunately," said the young mother, with a patient sigh; "nevertheless, that does not disprove the fact; and so long as I live I shall claim the name that my husband gave me, for the sake of this child."

The haughty widow knew that she was powerless to prevent her from doing as she said; but Ruth's calm assumption of independence angered her almost beyond endurance.

She saw that Ruth, although in humble circumstances, was by no means poverty-stricken. Her home was neat, comfortable, and tasteful; she was nicely dressed, and with a style that betrayed the true lady and made her exceedingly attractive. The little one's attire was also fine and dainty, although, at that moment, soiled by the accident that had occurred.

All this told her that Ruth, instead of having been crushed by her misfortune, had nobly risen above her troubles, conquered all obstacles, and was capable of making still further advancement in life.

"Oh, how I hate you!" Inez burst forth, with concentrated passion, as she gazed into the calm, beautiful face before her, and knew that henceforth she would have no power to wound her.

"I am sorry," was the gentle response, "for, surely, you must be a very unhappy woman to be the slave of such an unruly temper."

"Unhappy! I!" returned Inez, with a short, nervous laugh. "Why, I am exultant over the fact that I have triumphed over you—accomplished my purpose even beyond my most sanguine expectations. I never thought, when I swore my 'vendetta' against Ralph Plympton and you, that I should reign as mistress in his father's home, and control the vast wealth to which he was heir. I did not dream that my son would inherit Hazelwood Heights, and all that would have belonged to him had he lived; even to the private fortune which was held in trust for his heirs. It was rather a failure, wasn't it, Ruth, your trying to get this little upstart acknowledged as

the legitimate successor to the Plympton estate?" she concluded, maliciously, and indicating little Hope by a slighting gesture.

"A failure!" Ruth gravely repeated, but feeling almost sick in view of such a display of vindictiveness and spite. "Possibly it would be so regarded from your standpoint; but I would far rather live my humble life, working for my daily bread and the support of my little one, feeling content—yes, even happy—in so doing, than to possess your hundreds of thousands twice over, and have such a cankerworm of hate and passion continually gnawing at my heart-strings. You may glory in your proud position and wealth, and feel elated over the fact—as you have boasted—that you have virtually accomplished, as you swore to do, a miserable and contemptible revenge; but you have thereby so violated every moral law, every principle of truth, love, and honour, that in your soul, I am sure, you cannot know one moment of peace or restful content."

Inez Plympton's haughty face had grown grey and blank while listening to the above analysis of her life and character, and she was stricken speechless before the truths which had been so plainly spoken to her.

It was all true, and she was miserably conscious of it. There was no peace, no real satisfaction in life for her. She was

Poor in abundance, famished at a feast.

She was restless, irritable, and discontented, in spite of the fact that she had scarcely a material wish ungratified; while she could see, by Ruth's bright, cheerful face, the resonant tones of her sweet voice, the clear, steadfast light in her beautiful eyes, and by her unruffled manner, that she was more than content—"even happy"—in the humble sphere which she occupied, as she had said.

The knowledge was a bitter drop in her cup of triumph. In fact, it was no triumph, since she had not succeeded in crushing her rival and rendering her life wretched; but before she could frame a stinging retort to her moralizing, Ruth

continued, with a calmness born of conscious superiority :

"I do not envy you, Mrs. Plympton; I do not begrudge you your boasted wealth; I have even ceased to grieve over the loss of what rightfully belongs to this child of mine, although I should not hesitate to claim it if I could prove her right to it. I do not desire to claim any relationship or acquaintance with you, because of your union with the father of my husband. You can go your way—I will go mine; and I sincerely hope that we shall never meet again. But this is a free country," she continued, with a ringing note of independence in her voice; "and since I am indebted to no one save myself for what I possess, I shall govern my life according to my own convictions regarding what is right and proper. Come, dearie," she fondly added, laying her lips against the flushed face on her shoulder; "it is sleepy time for you now. Mrs. Plympton, your carriage is waiting."

And with a slight inclination of her pretty head, Ruth walked deliberately into her house and closed the door.

Inez Plympton stood looking after her a moment, an ugly frown on her brow, then darting one more lurid glance at the sign that had so angered her—"Mrs. Plympton, French Millinery," she turned and swept loftily out of the garden, entered her carriage, and was driven away.

An hour later she might have been seen sitting in her boudoir at Hazelwood Heights, absorbed in perplexing thought, her brilliant face expressive of some dark project in her mind.

"Bah!" she suddenly ejaculated, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders, "to have seen her to-day any one would have supposed her to be the victor—I the vanquished. Is she an icicle? Is there no way to reach her heart, to make her suffer? If there is, I will yet find it!"

And yet it had seemed, as far as she and her spite were concerned, as if Ruth was invulnerable at every point.

She had succeeded in alienating her husband's affections, or, rather, his allegiance; she had succeeded in parting them, only to see the young wife rise sublimely out of her "slough of despond" to the consciousness that the man whom she had married had never been worthy of her—to a realization of the fact that she had never really loved him, and that he had forfeited even her respect.

She had schemed to deprive her of wealth that rightfully belonged to her and her child, and had crowned her victory (?) by securing everything for herself, and reigning as mistress in the palatial home of the Plymptons.

And, in spite of all, Ruth had stood before her that day, calm, clear-eyed, without so much as a quaver of envy or regret in her tones, and told her that she was "happy."

She could not understand it.

Ah, no; she could not understand it—her nature was too gross and materialistic; she never yet had attained, and never could attain, the higher moral and spiritual plane of thought and action where Ruth lived, moved, and had her being.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

THE ROTHWICK HEIR WANTED.

On that same evening, after the exciting interview between Mrs. Anthony Plympton and Ruth, a box, addressed to "Miss Hope Plympton," arrived at the cosy home of that young lady.

Ruth's face glowed with pleasure, and a bright blush mounted to her brow, as she instantly recognized the handwriting on the wrapper.

She knew also pretty well what she would find on opening the box, for, at every Christmas and birthday, since their return from Europe, Basil Meredith had sent a lovely floral offering to her little one, with some dainty surprise for herself enclosed with it.

"Darling!" the fond mother exclaimed, in a tone of self-reproach, as she clasped the child close in her arms, "I have not once thought of this being your birthday. How could I have forgotten it!—and, oh!"—with a thrill of horror in her voice—"what if those horses had trampled out your little life this morning! How wretched, how desolate I should have been at this hour! But we will not think of it—let us see what our good friend has sent us."

Placing Hope on a chair beside her, she cut the twine that bound the mysterious package, removed the wrappings, lifted the cover, when lo! a beautiful basket of lilies of the valley, almost the counterpart of the one he had sent her in Paris, greeted her eyes.

"How lovely!" Ruth murmured, with smiling, but tremulous lips: "how kind, how thoughtful of him!"

But her words were followed by a regretful sigh, while a wistful expression shone in her large blue eyes. She longed, more than she dared confess even to herself, for her friend, and she had not seen him once since she bade him good-bye on the steamer, nearly two years previously.

She had heard from him occasionally, and his letters were always cheerful and chatty, while, of late, he had two or three times hinted that he hoped, ere long, to have the pleasure of seeing her.

She lifted the basket of lilies, and set it upon the table, their delicious fragrance filling the room, while little Hope clapped her hands gleefully and cried:

"Mine, mamma, mine!"

Underneath there was another box, and this was found to contain a marvellous little doll, with "real hair," jointed arms and legs, and "real eyes" that would "go to sleep and wake up!"

Then came a lovely picture, in water colours, representing a scene in the park, which Ruth had been enthusiastic over the day when she and Basil Meredith had driven together there the last time she had seen him.

She was deeply touched by this remembrance of her, and sat regarding it in a delicious reverie until Hope, becoming impatient at her long silence, pleaded to "get down," that she might "give dolly a ride in her carriage."

She lifted her to the floor, then stooped to gather up the various papers that had been used to protect her picture.

One of these was the *New York Sun*, and while she was folding it in an orderly manner her glance was attracted by the following headlines:

"A PERPLEXING MYSTERY—AN IMMENSE ENGLISH FORTUNE LIKELY TO LAPSE TO THE CROWN FOR WANT OF AN HEIR."

Then there followed an account explaining that an aged and wealthy baronet, Sir Neil Rothwick, had recently died, leaving no heir. He had long been an invalid, and had lived alone, save for his servants, in his great mansion in Derbyshire. It was reported that some thirty years previously his only daughter and child had eloped with a foreigner, whereupon Sir Neil had discarded her, and had heard nothing from her since.

Having left no will disposing of his property, there was no one who appeared to claim the magnificent estate, although the baronet's solicitors, Messrs. Temple and Henderson, of London, had advertised extensively for the nearest of kin.

Ruth was deeply interested, and not a little excited, as she read this account.

"Sir Neil Rothwick must have been the son of my great-grandfather, Sir Amos Rothwick," she murmured, thoughtfully, a bright spot of scarlet burning upon each cheek. "How strange that he should have no heir! How I wish that I might have even but a small share of that great wealth to smooth my future and

enable me to give Hope the best of advantages! Oh, dear! it is a strange world. It does not seem right for the whole of that great fortune to go to the Crown when there is Rothwick blood in my veins."

Then she told herself that she was foolish to become so excited over what she could not control, either one way or the other; and so, resolutely laying the paper aside, she gave Hope her supper, and then put her to bed.

Afterwards, she, with the help of her maid, hung her picture, and this, as it necessitated the moving of others in order to give it a place of honour, occupied her for some time, and it was eight o'clock before she was ready to sit down for the evening.

The moment her mind was at liberty she found herself thinking over again the account she had read in the *Sun*, until she became very nervous and restless, a keen sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction depressing her, even though she told herself that she was very foolish to be so disturbed.

She found the paper, and carefully re-read the article. Then she went to a trunk that stood in her chamber, brought forth the Rothwick relics in her possession, together with the book containing the account of her mother's connection with the family, and perused again the history of her grandfather's birth and relationship to Sir Amos Rothwick, whom she believed to have also been the father of the late Sir Neil Rothwick.

"My grandfather, Robert Allenwood, and Sir Neil were really half-brothers," she mused, after completing the story—"not legally so, of course; but somehow, I feel sure that Sir Amos meant to make some provision for the poor girl whom he had wronged, or 'he never would have sent her this key.'"

She took it up, and examined it as she spoke.

"Oh, if you could only speak and reveal the secret you hold!" she exclaimed, in a wistful tone. "Apparently, you are but a worthless bit of metal, and yet you may be the key to untold treasure. What could have become of that letter? Ah! it is all such a perplexing mystery."

"A Rothwick never forgives an injury until it is avenged," she repeated, as she recalled the legend of the Rothwick coat-of-arms, while she studied the rudely-carved thistle above two olive leaves. "I wonder if the discovery of the secret to which this is the key would, in any degree, avenge the wrong that Sir Amos Rothwick did my grandmother? What strange sentiment those old English devices embodied! Even if there is a trace of

the Rothwick blood in my veins, I do not believe I inherit a desire for revenge; for instance, I do not believe that I would ever lift my hand against Inez Gordon in retaliation for the wrongs she has done me. Revenge is a degrading passion, and often recoils upon itself; and, somehow, I feel that Inez Gordon may yet find it so to her sorrow.

"Ah! I am afraid I am growing morbid over this mystery and my wrongs," she interposed, giving herself a little shake. "I will put these tantalizing relics away, and think no more about them."

Acting at once upon this resolution, she returned them to her trunk, together with the paper containing an account of the search for a Rothwick heir, and then, after taking one more fond, farewell look at her picture, retired to rest.

CHAPTER II.

A PECULIAR EXPERIENCE AND A DELIGHTFUL SURPRISE.

The next day a singular incident occurred that was destined to have a great influence upon the future of Mrs. Ralph Plympton—our dear, lovable Ruth.

She had occasion to go to New York upon an important errand, although her season was over.

One of her customers was about to be married, and had commissioned her to provide hats for several costumes, giving her *carte blanche* for the purpose, and the privilege of exercising her own taste.

Time was precious to Ruth, for she did not like to be away from Hope longer than was actually necessary. So, taking the earliest express, she hoped to complete her shopping—which would not occupy her more than a couple of hours—and return that same evening. Usually, when making her purchases for the season, she was obliged to remain overnight, when she always sent for Mrs. Barstow to come and take charge of her little one.

The train had almost reached its destination, when it came to a stop at the crossing of another road, it being a rule that all trains should pause there to guard against accidents. Just as it was about starting again, Ruth, who was sitting very near the door, saw a shabbily-dressed,

barefooted boy dart forward and try to get into the carriage she was in.

He missed his footing, however, and fell, a hoarse, wild cry bursting from him as the train moved forward.

Ruth started to her feet, a terrible fear—that he would be crushed to death—blanching her face and thrilling every pulse with pain. She seized the signal-line above her head, and pulled it with all her strength. There followed two or three sharp, responsive whistles; then the train came to a stop, for the second time, with a jerk.

Ruth rushed out on to the platform to find the unfortunate boy drawn up in a heap between the rails, his face deathly white and contracted with pain, and holding one foot, the toes of which were crushed and bleeding. She heaved an involuntary sigh of relief at finding him alive; the sight was revolting enough, but it seemed almost a miracle that he had not been killed outright.

She sprang down to his side, her lovely face expressive of deepest sympathy.

"You poor child!" she pitifully exclaimed, and kneeling down to examine his wounds, made a picture of self-forgetfulness that was remarkable, although the boy's face and lips were not less colourless than her own.

She had two or three clean handkerchiefs in her bag, and drawing these forth, she first wrapped one and then another about the mutilated foot to stanch the copious bleeding. A crowd gathered about them by this time, and were regarding with curious eyes the sufferer and the lovely woman ministering to him.

The guard pressed forward and looked at the boy.

"Where do you live?" he demanded, with a frown.

"Yonder," the lad briefly returned, and nodding towards the city.

"Well, put him in the luggage-van, and we'll take him," the man said to a couple of brakesmen who stood near.

"Have you a home?" Ruth kindly inquired, a flush of indignation mantling her cheek at the indifference manifested by the guard.

"No; me and another feller goes shares in a cellar in — street," he replied, between groans of pain.

"In a cellar!" gasped Ruth, horror-stricken. "Haven't you any friends?"

"N-o," he faintly answered, and then hopped back, lump and white, into the arms of the brakesmen, who had lifted him to bear him to the luggage-van.

Ruth resolutely followed them, although they insisted that it was no place for a lady.

"I have some smelling-salts, and they will help to restore him," she said.

They deposited him upon the floor, making a rude effort to ensure his comfort by placing coats under his head; then, calling for water, she bathed his face and did what she could for him while the train was passing into the station.

He came to himself just as it stopped, but seemed weak from loss of blood, and in great pain.

"He'll have to go to the hospital," said the station-master. "We'd better ring for an ambulance, and ship him off as soon as possible."

"I won't go to a hospital," sullenly affirmed the boy, as he tried to struggle to his feet.

But he sank back again with a sharp cry of pain.

"Really," said Ruth, reassuringly, as she held her salts to his nostrils again, "I think the surgeons at some hospital would do better by you than any one else."

"I ain't going to have any old saw-bones get hold o' me," the lad resolutely retorted.

"If I go with you, and remain while your foot is dressed, will you go?" his gentle friend inquired, persuasively. "I am afraid you will suffer a great deal more, and your foot will be longer in getting well, if it is not properly cared for at once."

The boy searched her face with a shrewd glance for a moment, then he said:

"Perhaps you are right, lady. I will go with you."

"That is right," said Ruth, smiling; then turning to a brakesman, she asked,

HOW RUTH WON HER HERITAGE.

"Will you kindly call a carriage for me?"

"Better let us ring for the ambulance. 'Twon't cost anybody anything, and 'twill save yer time, lady," the man replied.

"Thank you; but I think I will have the carriage," Ruth returned, with quiet dignity.

Five minutes later the injured youth was carefully lifted into a comfortable vehicle, and, accompanied by his kind friend, was driven to the Roosevelt Hospital.

Upon their arrival there he was in intense pain. The surgeons, after an examination of his wounds, told Ruth that amputation of two of his toes would be necessary, and that, of course, she could not be allowed in the operating-room.

She talked a minute or two with the boy, whose name, she had learned, was William Browning. She assured him that he was in excellent hands, that everything would be done for his comfort, and that she would return in the afternoon, to ascertain if she had not proved a true prophet.

Then she bade him good-bye, and left him.

She hurried with her shopping in order to keep her promise with her protégé, and retained her carriage to expedite matters; but on arriving at the hospital a second time, she was told that the patient was suffering so severely that it was not deemed advisable that any one, save his nurse, should see him.

So Ruth left her card for him, after writing her address, and a cheerful message upon it, together with a handful of flowers, and then hurried away to her train, which she barely succeeded in catching.

She could not keep the poor little fellow out of her mind during her long ride home. He had a good face, she thought—an unusually intelligent face for one so low down in the social scale as he appeared to be, and, somehow, she felt a keen interest in him, and wondered if she could not manage in some way to improve his condition when he should be able to leave the institution.

It was almost dark when she reached her garden gate, and her heart bounded into her throat as she discerned the outlines of a strange figure in her porch and caught the tones of a voice that, for the last two years, had been all too dear to her.

Some one—a gentleman—was sitting in her willow rocker and holding little Hop in his arms.

"Mamma, mamma!" cried the child, clapping her dimpled hands with joy as she slipped off her perch upon the stranger's knee and ran down the walk to meet her.

Ruth stopped to snatch a kiss from her, then, flushing to her brow with pleasure, turned to greet—Basil Meredith.

"This is such an unexpected pleasure! When did you come?" she cried, holding out both hands to him. "And, oh!"—catching her breath and regarding him wonderingly—"Mr. Meredith! Why, can it be possible? Is it really you?" she faltered, hardly knowing what she said as her quick eye ran over his figure; for, wonderful to relate, the man was no longer maimed or misshapen.

He was standing nobly erect once more, a grand, stalwart, splendid physique. He towered aloft as if in proud consciousness of his recovered manliness.

"Yes, it is I," he smilingly replied, as he clasped her hands. "I am myself again, I am thankful to state, or—or I should not be here," he added in a lower, tenderer tone. "I came in the boat a couple of hours ago."

"But—I cannot understand!—how has this wonderful change been effected?" Ruth breathed in a tone almost of awe, yet flushing again at the unmistakable tenderness that pervaded his voice. "Oh, I am so glad for you!" she added, tremulously, as she sank into the chair he placed for her; for she was overcome with astonishment at the change in him.

"I will tell you all about it soon," he returned, as, with shining, eager eye, he bent to study her lovely face. "But tell me first how the world is prospering with you. I am afraid you have not quite kept your promise to me," he concluded, gravely, as he glanced with a look of dis-

approval at the little sign over her door. "I never dreamed that there could be any necessity for that."

"I will confess to you presently," Ruth responded, laughing out musically in the joy of her heart at having him there with her; "but, first, I must not forget that I am mistress here and the dispenser of hospitalities. Have you had tea, Mr. Meredith?"

"No; and I am afraid you will think me very presuming when I tell you that I came with the intention of supping with you and Miss Hope," he smilingly answered.

"Indeed, no; I am very glad; only I am afraid you must be nearly furnished, it is so late," she regretfully added.

"Mamma, Mary gave me some supper, but the gentleman wouldn't have any," little Hope here interposed, in an aggrieved tone.

Basil Meredith laughed.

"Yes," he said, "I must plead guilty to having been very obtrusive to a most pressing invitation. Besides," he continued, "I am afraid I have transgressed in keeping my little entertainer up later than usual. I pleaded for an extra hour."

"Never mind," said Ruth, "but she must toddle away to dreamland now; meanwhile, I shall also have to be excused, to assure myself that the larder is well stocked, for, to tell the truth, I had an adventure to-day, and entirely forgot my dinner; consequently, I am hungry, if you are not," she laughingly concluded.

She then slipped away into the house, her heart and pulse beating such rhythmic joy she dare not remain longer in his presence for fear of betraying too much.

She assured herself that Mary had already made thoughtful provision for herself and her guest; then, having put her sleepy darling to bed, she exchanged her travelling costume for a dainty tea-gown of pale blue, with trimmings of soft lace, after which she added a few touches to her already faultless table, before summoning Mr. Meredith to his tea.

During her two years of housekeeping in this little home of hers, Ruth had never "entertained" before.

She had no friends to visit her, while

her business had demanded so much of her time and thought she had not felt that she could make many acquaintances, or assume any social duties.

But she was none the less charming and graceful in serving her visitor now, and it was a very cosy and chatty meal that followed her home-coming and the surprise that had awaited her.

They did not say very much about themselves, for Mary was serving them; they left all personal experiences for a later and more confidential hour, when they would be in no fear of interruption.

The evening being very warm, they repaired to the porch after their hunger was appeased, when Mr. Meredith again referred to the subject of Ruth's "business."

"It tells its own story," he remarked, in a half reproachful tone. "Of course, you failed to secure your husband's fortune, and also the sympathy of his family, or you would not have been obliged to resort to anything of the kind. Why did you keep the truth from me?"

"Because," Ruth gravely returned, "I could not appeal to *any one* until I had first tested my own powers. Once I would not have believed that I could venture into such deep waters; but, after my experience in Paris, I began to feel that there was a latent strength within me that would enable me to rise to almost any occasion. If," she concluded, lifting her clear, trustful eyes to her companion, "I had *failed*, I should have kept my promise."

"Thank you," said Basil Meredith, a sincere admiration for the force of character which she had displayed thrilling both his heart and tone; "I am sure you have shown great judgment and perseverance as well as independence."

Then she proceeded to tell him, in detail, of her visit to Mr. Anthony Plympton; of his cruel reception of her and her child, and of his heartless refusal to acknowledge the claim of either upon his sympathy and protection, and of her struggle since.

"What a monster! There was no manliness in him! It is no wonder that his son"— Mr. Meredith got, thus far,

then suddenly checked himself. "Pardon me," he added, more calmly; "but if you had only confided in me at the time, I believe I could have helped you. I am sure the man could have been compelled to renounce his claim upon Ralph Plympton's private income. I believe it can be done even now," he added, with sudden energy, "in spite of the loss of your certificate, the death of the justice, and the burning of the records."

"How can that be possible?" queried Ruth, in astonishment.

"Why, in the first place, your husband took you abroad, *as his wife*; you were so registered on the passenger list of the *Germanic*. He introduced you as such to numberless persons, myself among the number, and there are plenty of people who would cheerfully testify to the fact, while you lived in Paris for nearly a year, and were everywhere recognized as Mrs. Plympton. These facts, even though no formal ceremony could be proven, would serve, according to the laws of the State of New York, to establish your claim as his legal wife."

"I wish I had known that," said Ruth, regretfully. "I wish now that I had told you at the time, but I was so crushed and heartbroken, in view of Mr. Plympton's bitter denunciations, that I felt as if I must hide from every one who had ever known me."

"Poor little woman!" murmured Basil Meredith, with a world of tenderness in his voice, "it was a cruel experience for you. If I could have known—if — But you shall be righted yet."

"I fear it would be of no use to attempt anything of the kind at this late day, since Inez Gordon is now mistress at Hazelwood Heights."

"What!" interposed Mr. Meredith, in amazement.

"Oh, I forgot that you did not know," said Ruth, with a start; "but it is true. She met Mr. Plympton in Paris, where they were married, the March following Ralph's death, and she now queens it in the home which, according to every moral right, should belong to Hope."

"Why did you not write me of this?" questioned her companion, gravely.

"Because—oh, Mr. Meredith, I *could* not," Ruth replied, almost passionately. "I did not *want* you to know about it. If I had told you *anything*, you would have had to hear the whole. I simply wrote you of Mr. Plympton's death last winter, but I could not speak of Inez Gordon to you; to have rehearsed my story would have involved so much that was torturing to us both. But, since the truth is out, now, you shall know all."

And then she told him everything that had occurred since her return to Albany, while he attentively listened, his stern face growing more set and resolute with every added fact.

CHAPTER III.

"THIS HOUR HAS CROWNED MY LIFE WITH ITS RICHEST BLESSING."

"And all this time I have believed you living in affluence as the acknowledged widow of Ralph Plympton!" Basil Meredith exclaimed, when Ruth's story was finally ended. "If I had known the truth, I should have been wretched; I should have —"

"Pray do not be so disturbed," Ruth hastened to remark, as he paused. "I have not suffered for anything except in the knowledge that my child and I were repudiated. I have, on the contrary, been comparatively happy. At first I was a little doubtful about the success of my experiment in endeavouring to support ourselves in this way; but, on the whole, I have rather enjoyed my work since becoming accustomed to the responsibility of being a business woman."

"If I had only known!" Mr. Meredith repeated, regretfully; and then added, with a sternness that somewhat startled his companion, "But you should never submit to such a wrong. You shall have your rights. That unprincipled woman shall not triumph over you. I believe that your position can be proved even at this late day, and I will spare nothing to effect that result. You say there is a young heir. Of course, he must have his share of the property; and, if there was no will, his mother would come in for the wife's dower. But Hope's

father would also have rights, and these, added to his private fortune, would make no mean inheritance for the little girl. What an unprincipled schemer that woman has been!"

"Well, I cannot afford to let her destroy the pleasure of this evening for me," Ruth smilingly remarked. "I do not like to think of her at any time, least of all now; so, my friend, let us ignore her, if you please, and tell me about the wonderful change that has come to you. Oh, Mr. Meredith, it seems like a miracle to me. I am actually awed in view of it," she concluded, in an unsteady voice.

"And I, too, can hardly realize it," Basil Meredith said, in a reverent tone; "and yet I have recovered so gradually, and the change has involved so much, that I have had ample opportunity to become accustomed to it. Do you remember," he resumed, after a slight pause, "the article on 'Christian Science' that I read to you one day during our homeward voyage?"

"Oh, yes," said Ruth, with eager interest. "Oh, can it?"—

"Well, it impressed me more deeply than I was willing to admit at the time," Basil continued, without replying directly to her question; "and finding, on my arrival in New York, that some one must go to Boston for the firm, I eagerly seized upon the opportunity, with the determination to seek out the man who had been such a sufferer from hip disease, and who was so miraculously cured. I did so; I found that account true in every particular, and at once became so absorbed in this new departure from 'Materia Medica' that I resolved to test it upon myself. It has required unlimited patience, but all the time there has been steady, though very gradual, improvement; that has kept me from being discouraged, until the principle of 'Christian Science' has triumphed, and I am a new man, both physically and spiritually."

Mr. Meredith concluded in a voice vibrant with mingled gratitude and reverence.

"It is wonderful!" said Ruth, regarding him with grave, earnest eyes. "It almost

seems to me as if you are living in a different world!"

"And I am, my friend," he smilingly replied, "for all things have become new to me. I was blind, now I see; I was maimed; now I am whole. But, my darling," he went on, his voice tremulous with exceeding tenderness, "I have something else to speak of now. When I parted from you on the boat that day in New York, it seemed to me as if my life was not worth the living, for, in leaving you, a great darkness appeared to settle over me. I had long been learning to love you, and with a deeper significance to the term than I had ever experienced before. But I was, as I believed, a hopeless cripple, and I felt that I had no right to clog your young life with my unsightly personality. It is true you had told me, more than once, that you never gave the fact a thought—that to you the 'real me'—and those words mean so much more to me now—as you expressed it, wholly eclipsed all physical defects. Oh, you tempted me sorely, little woman, that day when you illustrated your meaning by referring to that exquisite heliotrope in the broken vase. Do you remember?" he interposed softly, and bending eagerly towards Ruth.

"Yes, I remember," she tremulously breathed.

Basil Meredith reached out his hand and captured the one that lay upon the arm of her chair near him, and, though it trembled in his clasp, it lay there, passive, like a little bird, content in its nest.

"Yes, you tempted me almost beyond my strength," he resumed, "and I had a terrible battle to fight before I could school myself to calmness and submission to what I felt to be right. Still, I tried to glean a little comfort by snatching at the straw of hope which the reading of that article on 'Christian Science' had thrown out to me on the ocean of my despair. I said I would go to Boston immediately. I would know and prove the truth; I would claim, as my right, the healing that had done so much for others. I told myself that I would never see you again until I had either won what I sought, or, failing, could school myself to

banish for ever all hope of winning you. It has been a mighty struggle—one that I should have relinquished long since in despair but for the goal I had in view. Dear, the shattered vase has been recast, while I trust that the *real man* has lost nothing of the moral and spiritual stature that he originally possessed, and so all that I am and have is yours. Ruth, do you—can you love me? Will you be my wife?"

Tears were raining thick and fast over the face of that fair woman, but they were tears of joy in view of the great gift that had just been laid at her feet; while mingling with this was a feeling of deep sympathy with, and reverence for, the man who had so nobly and patiently fought and won a desperate battle. She could not for the moment control herself sufficiently to speak, and Basil was wondering, with a strange heart-sinking, why she did not respond to his appeal, when a hot, glittering drop splashed upon the hand that was still clasping hers.

He started suddenly erect in his chair.

"Ruth, dearest, have I hurt you? Are the old wounds still so sore that you cannot cover them with the mantle of forgetfulness? Have I struggled and conquered in vain?" he cried, with a note of agony in his tones that cut her like a knife.

"No, no!" she breathed, as she involuntarily clasped her other hand over his, as if she was fearful of losing the great gift of his love out of her grasp.

The act, simple though it was, spoke volumes. It told him all that he yearned to know. It showed him that she had already given herself to him, heart and soul.

The next moment he was kneeling beside her chair, his arms round her, her fair head pillowed upon his broad chest.

"Ah," he exclaimed, a ring of gladness and supreme content in his voice, "I did not think that my heart could have so mislaid me! You do love me, sweet! You are mine for all time! Ruth, Ruth," he went on, laying his lips against her cheek, "if you could know what the name means to me, and how it has been treasured in my heart like some potent charm, to spur me on to greater efforts! It is the symbol

of all that is lovable, pure, and womanly; it has been my inspiration when discouraged, my anchor when in doubt, and the one beacon that has illumined my darkened way. Have you wanted me, love? Has your own heart longed for me?"

"So much, so much!" she murmured, lifting one hand and laying it caressingly on his face.

"Ah, that is a blessed assurance, dearest, and I believe that my yearning soul has long felt and owned it, but I dared not heed it until I could come to you perfect in form and stature."

Ruth lifted her head from its resting-place, and tried to look into his face, although, in the deepening darkness, she could scarcely distinguish his features.

"You need not have waited for that, Basil," she whispered, and shyly using his Christian name for the first time; "for my heart has long owned you as its king."

"And you would not have shrunk from becoming my wife, deformed as I was when you saw me last?" he questioned, in a low, impassioned tone.

"I should have been *proud* to have been your wife, even then."

"And now?"

"Ah, *now*?" she repeated, a musical ripple of joyous laughter breaking from her lips; "there is not a woman living to-night, Basil, who is so inexpressibly happy as I."

The man rose, drawing her also to her feet, his arms still enfolding her.

"Come, let us go in," he said, eagerly; "I want to see the face of this proud and happy little woman; I want to look into her shining eyes, and read for myself a confirmation of the sweet story she has told me. I have been starving for the sight of her for so long, I cannot allow her to be unwrapped with this mantle of darkness another moment."

He led her in through the hall to the pretty sitting-room, where a softly-shaded lamp threw a mellow light over everything; then, taking her face between both his hands, he bent and looked into her beautiful eyes.

"You love me, Ruth?" he questioned

again with infinite tenderness; "tell me once more, here, where I can see you."

"I love you, dear," she frankly answered, though an exquisite colour flooded her whole face with the confession.

"You will be my wife?"

"Yes," she said, her sweet lips tremulous from exceeding joy.

He drew in a deep breath of supreme content.

"Ah," he said, his voice thrilling with glad triumph, "this hour has crowned my life with its richest blessing! Now I know, once more, the meaning of the word hope!"

As he ceased speaking, he bent and touched his lips to hers, fondly, almost reverently, in their first caress.

When Basil Meredith sought his betrothed again the next morning, his first words after greeting her were:

"Ruth, have you a screwdriver anywhere about the house?"

"Yes," she replied, but opening her eyes wonderingly at the strange query.

"Then get it for me, please," he smilingly requested.

She brought it, and he laughed outright as he observed the look of perplexity on her face.

"Well?" he questioned, playfully.

"I am wondering what repairs you are contemplating in connection with my humble abode; or whether I myself am about to be immured in some closet for safe-keeping," she demurely remarked.

"Neither, sweet; but, with your permission, I am going to take down that little square of painted tin over your door. The public are no longer entitled to the services of my promised wife," Mr. Meredith gravely returned.

Ruth blushed rosily at this reference to her new relations towards him, but quietly observed:

"Very well; I shall not object, if such is your wish."

So the sign that had been so obnoxious to Inez Plympton was removed; and, later, Basil negotiated with a milliner in the city to take the small but choice stock of goods at a fair valuation, for

Ruth would henceforth have no need to toil for her support. His next business was to interview a shrewd lawyer, with reference to the recovery of Ralph Plympton's private fortune, and possibly a portion of his father's estate, for little Hope.

The attorney thought there was more than an even chance of making the undertaking a success, although it would doubtless involve some sharp legal fighting, since there was no certificate, and no witnesses could be found to prove Ruth's marriage with Mr. Ralph Plympton. With such evidence there would be no difficulty whatever in securing his property to his child.

Mr. Meredith, with a resolute gleam in his eyes, ordered him "to fight."

He spent three delightful days with his betrothed, and then said that he must return to New York, but would come every week to spend the Sunday with her until his home in Madison Avenue was ready for her reception. There was much that he wished to do in the way of repairs, decoration, and furnishing before installing her there as mistress.

It was decided that the marriage should occur just three months from the day of their betrothal.

As Basil was about to leave her, Ruth begged him to go to see Will Browning before the week was out, and bring her tidings from him.

"And, Basil," she added, wistfully, "if the surgeons at the hospital will allow it, I wish you would bring him here with you when you come again."

"Why, Ruth, love, surely you are not going to turn your mite of a home into a hospital?" her lover asked, in surprise.

"No; but the poor boy said he had no friends and no home, but a 'share in a cellar;' so I would like him to come here and stay until his foot is well. I am sure he isn't a bad boy, and perhaps if the right influences were thrown round him, he might become a good and useful man," she thoughtfully returned.

"Well, I will see what can be done for him," Basil gravely responded, and then was obliged to hurry away to catch his train.

CHAPTER IV.

A GHOST OF THE PAST.

Meanwhile Mrs. Anthony Plympton, with her son and heir, her French maid and nurse, her horses, carriage, coachman and footman, had made her appearance in Saratoga, and, with a great deal of style and flourish of trumpets, took possession of a fine suite of rooms at the Grand Union Hotel.

Of course, as she was still in the first year of her widowhood, she did not attempt to mingle much in the gay society of the house; she was discreetly respectful to the memory of the late Anthony Plympton, over whose broad acres and full coffers she was so fortunate as to preside.

She had flourished at the Springs for about three weeks, when one morning, as she was returning from her habitual drive, her attention was attracted by a gentleman, mounted on a fine black horse, who was just riding out of the city.

He was a striking-looking man, somewhat stout of figure, with a clear, olive skin, intensely black eyes and hair, and wore a moustache of the same hue.

As they passed each other, simply exchanging a casual glance, the gentleman gave a violent start, then turned to look back, a curious gleam in his coal-black eyes, a frown of perplexity contracting his brow.

"*Quien sabe?*—who knows?" he muttered, revealing two rows of very white, even teeth as his lips curled in a singular smile.

Turning his horse directly about, he followed Mrs. Anthony Plympton's elegant turn-out, at a discreet distance, back to the city, until he saw it stop and the attractive widow alight before the Grand Union, whereupon he wheeled about again and rode rapidly away.

That same evening the brilliant Mrs. Plympton, attired in one of her most becoming costumes, was seated upon the verandah of the hotel, conversing with a knot of gentlemen who had gathered about her—it was noticeable that ladies seldom sought her society—when two others were seen approaching her.

One was a Mr. McIntyre, who had made himself very agreeable to her; the other was a stranger—the horseman she had met that morning.

"Ah, Mrs. Plympton," the former gentleman smilingly remarked, as he paused before her, "you are holding high court as usual. Allow me to present another aspiring knight. Mrs. Plympton—Señor Castillo."

What was it that, at the sound of that name, made Inez Plympton catch her breath so suddenly and clench one white, slender hand until the nails almost cut her palm?

What made her face lose all its brilliant colouring and a cold shiver, like a slimy reptile, go creeping down her back?

Had she heard the name aright—Señor Castillo?

Ah, yes; she knew who the man was, even as she glanced into his eyes and saw there the mocking gleam which told her that he had needed no introduction to her in order to assure himself of her identity.

But the proud woman of the world was barely an instant recovering herself, and, with a graceful bow and a brilliant smile, professing that she was "delighted to meet Señor Castillo."

With infinite tact she entertained her half-dozen admirers, never allowing the conversation to flag for one moment.

She had no desire to be left alone with the Spaniard, for she instinctively realized that he had sought her with a purpose, she hoped to keep her admirers about her until he became wearied and passed on.

But she was destined to be foiled in this purpose, however, for it was evident that the señor had no intention of deserting the field. He appeared to be highly entertained by the charming widow, who also proved herself to be especially intelligent and witty at repartee; and in an hour the little coterie appeared to enjoy the brilliant fencing to the utmost.

Finally the band struck up a spirited march, when Señor Castillo abruptly stepped forward and requested the pleasure of joining the promenade with Mrs. Plympton.

She hesitated an instant, then, with a resolute gleam in her dark eyes, laid her hand upon his arm, and, bowing a smiling adieu to the devotees she was deserting, moved slowly down the verandah with the man.

CHAPTER V.

A ROMANCE INTERESTS SARATOGA'S FASHIONABLE SOCIETY.

"I flatter myself, Mrs. Plympton, that this meeting is a happy coincidence," Señor Castillo blandly observed, as he led his companion away from the crowd.

"A coincidence!" she repeated, in a tone of surprise, and arching her beautiful brows inquiringly.

"Yes, señora, for your face is almost the counterpart of one that was once very dear to me," he responded, with an impressive sigh and an air of assumed melancholy.

"Ah, indeed!" Inez returned, an unmistakable sneer curling the corners of her cruel mouth.

"Yes, señora, a face that I once thought the most beautiful one in the world."

"Señor Castillo is pleased to be complimentary," was the brief and slightly sarcastic reply.

"Pardon; not at all. It is no flattery to tell the señora that she is beautiful," the man affably rejoined; "and, if I mistake not"—with a quick, keen glance into her face—"there is Spanish blood in her veins as well as in mine."

"Yes," she indifferently observed, as if to say, "Do you think so?"

"And one is naturally drawn towards one's own countrywomen."

"That is generally conceded to be true, I believe. Is it long, since you were in Spain, Señor Castillo, if I questioned Inez, thinking it about possible to change the tenor of the conversation?"

"Ah, many years, señora," he returned, with a deep sigh; "but always my heart has longed for sunny Spain—for dear old Madrid and the scenes of my childhood."

"Madrid!" repeated Inez, musingly, and with a slight tremor of her upper lip.

"Madam has been in Madrid?" questioned Señor Castillo, with a sly glance at the impenetrable face beside him.

"Yes, I have travelled a great deal. I have been in Spain," she replied, indefinitely.

"Is it long since madam was there?"

Inez drew herself erect, breathing hard.

"Several years," she briefly and coldly answered.

"Ha, ha!" softly laughed her companion, his white teeth gleaming between the sinister curves of his lips. "It is twenty-five years since I saw old Madrid—since I saw the face that was once so beautiful to me; the face of—her name was Gertrude— Ah! did you speak, madam?" he suddenly interposed, as a stifled moan escaped her.

"It was nothing," she said, with an impatient gesture.

"Ah, Gertrude was not a Spanish girl," the man resumed, his eyes still on her face; "she was fair, with blue eyes and nut-brown hair; but her features! oh, señora, so like your own. She is dead, but she left a little child—a girl; her name was Inez."

"Yes, very well; I know it—I understand you. There is no further need of dissembling, Señor Castillo," Inez Plympton exclaimed, as she dropped his arm and turned, proudly confronting him. "Now, what is it that you want of me?"

"Ha, ha! and so madam comprehends at last!" he returned, in smooth, silky tones of triumph that made the woman's flesh creep anew.

"Of course I comprehend—of course I knew you the moment your name was uttered in my presence," she retorted, irritably. "But what do you want?" she imperatively demanded, but her face white as wax.

"I want—you!"

"Me!" Inez repeated, with a continuous toss of her haughty head, her lips curling with infinite scorn. "That is a moderate demand, surely! Do you imagine for a moment that you will gain your point?"

"Nevertheless, I want you—I have come to America especially to search for you!"

"But your object?" she cried, with an angry impatience. "Did you imagine that I would greet you with open arms? that I would fall upon your neck and cry, 'Here I am; do with me as you will'? If so, you are destined to be sadly disappointed. Ha, ha! you little know the nature with which you have to deal. I acknowledge my Spanish blood—I warn you that it is every whit as hot as your own; and I tell you at the outset I repudiate you utterly."

She had spoken passionately, fiercely; and she emphasized the last word with a decided stamp of one white-slipped foot that betrayed her deadly earnestness.

Her companion's eyes gleamed like diamonds as he listened to her, and his thin lips were drawn tightly across his white teeth in a sinister smile that drove her nearly to distraction; but his voice was just as smooth and oily as before, as he said:

"Ah, but, my dear madam, I think you will qualify that statement when you have heard a little story which I have to tell you. I have it in my power to do you a great service!"

"I do not need your services, Señor Castillo," haughtily interrupted Inez Plympton; "I do not wish to have anything whatever to do with you. I have wealth, position, beauty—three essentials that will give me the *entrée* to any society; therefore I can dispense with your services; I can even dispense with your acquaintance," she concluded, with a proud insolence that was exasperating beyond measure.

A hiss of rage escaped the man, and the sound was like the warning hiss of a serpent.

But, controlling himself with an effort, he softly responded:

"Tut, tut! madam's Spanish blood is getting the better of her discretion. Come, we will reason together, my proud beauty. Let us go to yonder pavilion, where no one will interrupt. I will tell you a secret; then, if you still choose to repudiate me, and repel my efforts to aid you, well and good; Alfeo Castillo will go his way, and lay no further claim to madam's consideration."

"Humph! but if I should accept this service—what is your object? What will you expect in return?" Inez demanded, sharply, and searching his face with her shrewd eyes.

Again a sinister smile crossed the man's lips, and he laughed softly in a way that made her shiver, resolute as she was.

"If I should prove to madam that she has need of my assistance, and if my scheme should result as I have every reason to hope it will, surely the servant would be worthy of his hire—he would expect to share in the glory of conquest."

His companion frowned and shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"You are very mysterious," she irritably exclaimed. "Ha!"—looking up with a great start, a light breaking over her face—"do you mean—Surely, you cannot mean that!"

She was breathless, panting with excitement now, her tones expressive of an eagerness which indicated that a sudden and gratifying revelation had come to her through his insinuations.

"Come to the pavilion," the man repeated. "I will tell you my story; then you shall judge for yourself whether it will be worth your while to make a friend of, or repudiate, Alfeo Castillo."

It was evident that he had difficulty in controlling himself as he said this, for his face was deathly pale, and he trembled visibly with suppressed passion.

Inez made no further objection; she allowed him to lead her to a small summer-house, a glow of triumph and expectation on her face that made her wonderfully beautiful.

They remained in the pavilion, in earnest conversation, for upwards of an hour, Señor Castillo speaking in low, cautious tones, his companion eagerly interrupting him now and then to ask some pertinent question; and, once, a soft, rippling laugh of exultation escaped her, causing a pair of lovers who were pacing a walk outside to pause and listen again for its liquid sweetness.

When they finally emerged from the summer-house, there was an unmistakable air of confidence between them,

which betokened a mutual interest and good-fellowship; while Inez Plympton bore herself with an air of pride that might have been assumed by one who had just been proclaimed an empress or queen.

"Yes," she remarked, as she took Señor Castillo's arm to return to the hotel, "if you accomplish this for me, you may ask what you will, and I will not refuse you."

"Aha, señora! what I will! That might mean a great deal," said the man, as he bent to look with eager eyes into the flushed face beside him.

"Oh, well," she answered, her colour deepening, "of course I mean anything in reason."

"And who is to be the judge of what is reasonable?" he inquired, with a light laugh.

"If you please, we will not discuss that question at present," Inez haughtily responded. "You can rest assured, however, that if you succeed in what you have undertaken, I shall reward you in no ingradely manner."

"But if I should fail?" the señor added. "Mind, I have not the slightest fear of failure; but if anything unforeseen should happen to thwart me, you would certainly feel that my efforts merited some reward?"

"I don't know about that," his companion coldly returned. "I supply the money for you to work with—you give your time and effort; I think, in the event of failure, we would be quits."

"But you are so rich, while I have barely enough to enable me to exist," pleaded the man, in a wheedling tone.

"I am sure I owe you nothing for my present prosperity," Inez spiritedly retorted, and with a note of bitter scorn in her tone.

Señor Castillo winced as if she had struck him, and again a hiss of rage escaped him, while his eyes blazed with a lurid fire.

"Madam should choose her words with more care," he muttered, warningly.

She laughed mockingly, and tossed her head with an air of haughty defiance.

"There are some truths that sound more

pertinent than agreeable in the telling," she insolently retorted.

"Have a care!" he hoarsely whispered.

She stopped in the path and confronted him.

"Do you think I fear you?" she cried, with a look and bearing that made him shrink involuntarily, in spite of his Spanish blood, although the corners of his mouth curled, showing his teeth, like the snarl of an angry dog. "I do not know what it is to fear a single human being; and if you imagine that I will concede anything in connection with you, you will find yourself greatly mistaken. But for what you have just told me I would not spend my breath to exchange a single sentence with you. Do you think I could ever forget the past, under any circumstances? Yet you have excited my ambition, and one will do a great deal to achieve fame, wealth, power; so, if you win what you have promised, I will do great things for you; but if you fail"—

She did not complete her sentence, but the look which she flashed at him, with those last words, was far more expressive than language.

"Very well," he sullenly responded. "I will endeavour to win the 'great things' from you. There is no such word as 'fail' in this case, so let us at least preserve the semblance of friendliness until I have placed the treasure within your grasp."

"Very well," said Inez, after a moment of thought, and moderating her tone, "let it be so."

They returned to the verandah, and, seeking a retired spot, continued their conversation for some time longer. When the interesting widow finally arose to retire, it was remarked, by a number of observing visitors, that Señor Castillo accompanied her to the foot of the stairs, in the spacious entrance-hall, where he took leave of her with great *empressement*, whereupon the observers began to look wise and prophetic.

When her stay at the Springs was over, and she returned to her paternal home on the Hudson, Señor Castillo also disappeared, and the romantic episode of the summer, like many another, became an

affair of the past, and was forgotten by society, excepting, perhaps, a few disappointed fortune-hunters, who had secretly aspired to win the brilliant widow's favour and the management of her handsome bank account.

Yes, forgotten by all but the principals of the so-called romance, who were destined to meet again in the near future under peculiar and intensely interesting circumstances.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

The morning following Mr. Meredith's return to New York, he presented himself at the Roosevelt Hospital to inquire for the protégé of his *fiancée*.

The boy was doing nicely, the attending surgeon informed him. "The little fellow has good, healthy blood in his veins, a vigorous constitution, and his wounds will heal rapidly," he remarked, in a blunt, offhand manner; "he'll soon be all right."

Basil asked if he might see him, and was at once conducted to the ward to which Will Browning had been assigned, and where he found him already hobbling round on crutches, looking bright and happy, and trying to make himself useful by waiting upon and speaking words of cheer to others who were greater sufferers than himself.

The moment that Mr. Meredith looked into his plain but good-natured face, he was also "sure that Will Browning was not a bad boy."

He found, upon conversing with him, that he had acquired many of the rough ways and mannerisms of the class of boys with whom he had been accustomed to mingle; that he could even swear and fly in a rage upon occasion; but underlying these glaring faults, it was evident that there was a native honesty and an ambitious desire that had been instilled into his mind by a good mother.

Will's face lighted with pleasure and interest when Mr. Meredith informed him that he had been sent to inquire after his welfare by the kind lady who had befriended him at the time of his accident.

He plunged his hand into a pocket and brought forth a soiled and crumpled card, which he passed to the gentleman, and bluntly inquired:

"Is it her?"

"Yes," Mr. Meredith replied; "Mrs. Plympton sent me to you."

The boy's face grew thoughtful. He turned his glance from the card to the gentleman's face, then back upon the name engraven upon the bit of pasteboard, in evident perplexity. He opened his lips as if to make some remark, then closed them again with a decided shake of his head, all of which Mr. Meredith observed with some curiosity.

"I am going to see Mrs. Plympton again next Saturday," he remarked, "How would you like to go with me to make her a little visit?"

"Me!" exclaimed Will, in amazement.

"Yes," said the gentleman, smiling at his astonishment; "she told me to bring you, if you were able to leave the hospital, and you can remain with her, if you like, until your foot gets well."

"Well, that beats the—the"—the boy began, then flushed and hesitated a moment, after which he briefly responded:

"Yes, I'll go; thank ye, sir."

Mr. Meredith spoke to the surgeon about the matter, and, his consent to the plan having been obtained, arranged to call for Will at a certain hour on the following Saturday.

When the day arrived, and he presented himself at the hospital, according to his agreement, he found the boy eagerly awaiting his coming. He had evidently tried to make himself as presentable as possible; his face and hands were clean, his clothing well brushed, while one of the nurses had provided him with a very decent shoe and stocking for his uninjured foot, the other being encased in bandages, not requiring any.

But just as he was about to enter the carriage with Mr. Meredith, he insisted that he must go to the cellar where he had lodged, previous to his accident, before going to the station.

Basil objected to this at first, fearing that they might be late for the train; but the boy seemed so upset by the

refusal to comply with his request that he finally relented, and told the driver to get over the ground as rapidly as possible.

They were driven to a wretched locality, and the "cellar" was found to be a miserable hole, the mere sight of which sent a thrill of disgust over Basil Meredith, as he was thus forced to realize to what straits a human being must be reduced to seek such a place as that to live in.

But the boy alighted and made his way down into it with all possible speed, and in a few minutes reappeared, bearing in his hand a small package, wrapped in coarse brown paper, while an expression of intense satisfaction rested on his face.

Once in the train, which they had ample time to catch, Mr. Meredith tried to draw out his youthful companion, and was surprised to find him unusually intelligent upon certain subjects, although he was deplorably ignorant as far as educational acquirements were concerned.

He appeared to have a peculiar penchant for all kinds of machinery, and was even better posted than his companion upon certain points, which he argued with a clearness of perception and understanding that was quite remarkable in one of his years.

"I shouldn't wonder if he made his mark in the world as an inventor, some day, provided he has the right kind of training," was Mr. Meredith's mental comment while listening to him.

Ruth received her guests with great cordiality, and made the poor wail, around whom she had so kindly thrown the mantle of her sympathy, feel at once at home.

She took him directly into Mary's domains, and authorized the girl to make him as comfortable as possible.

"Have you come to stay, Will?" she inquired, with a kind smile, as she placed a rocker for him to sit upon. "Do you think you would like to remain here until your foot is well?"

He glanced round the clean, cosy kitchen; glanced out into the pretty garden, at the velvety lawn, the flowers and trees, with a wistful look; but after a moment of hesitation replied cautiously:

"I don't know, marm; I'll tell you before Monday."

He had a nice supper, which he disposed of with the keenest relish, after which he went out into the back porch, whither he soon enticed Hope, whom he amused for more than an hour, and who appeared to yield him her childish confidence at once.

Later, when he was shown to a clean little room and bed, he remarked to Mary, who lighted him thither, that it was the nicest place he had ever slept in, since he could remember, "though mother did have a good home once," he added, with simple pathos.

On Monday morning, when Mr. Meredith asked him if he had made up his mind what he was going to do, he amused that gentleman by replying, bluntly and decidedly:

"I'm going to stay, sir."

And thus Will Browning became a member of Ruth's little household, where there was laid the foundation of what was destined to be a very useful life.

One Saturday, some four weeks afterwards, Mr. Meredith came down by the morning train; for he had planned for a little trip, to be followed by a sail on the river and a picnic in a certain grove on its banks.

The whole family were to go, including Mary, who was to have charge of Hope and Rex, who enjoyed an excursion as well as any one. The drive to the grove was charming, the sail on the broad Hudson delightful, and the lunch, later, eaten off a great flat, mossy rock, beneath tall, plummy, murmuring pines, was most appetizing. It was "just the finest time," Will Browning informed his friends, "that he had ever had," and his bright, happy face testified to the truth of his assertion.

He had improved greatly under Ruth's care, both in health and manners, and had become so fond of her and Hope that he seemed to regard no effort for them as too great. He had also become very enthusiastic over the country, the trees, flowers, and birds being sources of exceeding delight to him.

Thus, to-day, after he had eaten his

lunch, he left the group under the trees, and, taking Rex with him for company, wandered off upon an exploring expedition on.

He was told he might be gone an hour. Meantime, Hope, having been made comfortable in the carriage for a nap, and Mary being employed in taking care of what was left over from their lunch, Mr. Meredith settled himself to read to Ruth from a new magazine.

The grove to which our picnickers had come lay close along the river's side for a mile or more, while high on the bank above there was a fine carriage-road that wound its serpentine way, following every bend of the broad stream, for many miles.

Will, whose foot was almost well now, wandered about the grove for a while, picking ferns and flowers and vices to take back to the cottage; but, growing tired with the rough walking after a time, he finally mounted to the road and followed that for some distance.

At last, espying a moss-grown log by the wayside, he hastened towards it and sat down to rest and to arrange, in a more convenient form, the floral treasure he had gathered. While thus engaged he became aware that Rex had deserted him. He looked up and down the road, but the dog was not in sight. He whistled and called him by name, but if he was within hearing he paid no attention.

Finally, thinking that the dog might have gone back to the party, he concerned himself no further about him, until he suddenly heard his short, sharp bark, followed by a shrill scream, which seemed to proceed from a bend farther down the road. Springing to his feet, Will hastened forward to ascertain what was the trouble.

There was a huge rock just where the road turned, and beyond this he could seem to hear low growls, mingled with angry commands in a woman's voice telling the dog to be gone.

As soon as Will rounded the rock, he at once understood what the trouble was. The great boulder formed the corner boundary of some fine grounds, surrounding a handsome residence that overlooked the river, and underneath its

shadow and that of some noble maples there was the prettiest nook imaginable, with rustic seats scattered about, a couple of hammocks swinging from hooks in the trees, while a lovely fountain tossed its cool spray into the air in the centre of the little glade.

Here Will found that Rex—whose especial delight consisted in treeing cats and holding them his captives indefinitely—had driven a beautiful tortoiseshell kitten up into a small maple, while he sat on his haunches beneath, watching his prisoner with a very self-satisfied air.

A lady was standing near, scolding him, and trying to drive him off by shaking her parasol at him. She was daintily dressed, all in white, with a pretty Leghorn hat on her head, and held an open book in one hand, which seemed to indicate that she had been disturbed in her reading by Rex's pursuit of the cat.

"Here, you boy," she cried, as Will came into view, "is this your dog? If it is, call him off at once."

Will started, and flashed a vivid red as her imperative tones fell upon his ears. Then he took a few steps forward, while he searched her face with eager eyes.

His manner attracted her attention to him more particularly, whereupon she also changed colour, started slightly, and drew in her breath sharply. But quickly recovering herself, she angrily exclaimed:

"Don't you hear? Call this dog away instantly!"

"Rex," said Will, authoritatively, "come here, sir!"

The dog wagged his tail vigorously, cast one more wistful look at the kitten above him, then, with a disappointed whine, walked demurely to the boy's side, and lay down at his feet.

"You'll have to take him away altogether, or I shall not be able to call the kitten down," said the lady, with sharp impatience.

"I will, marm," said Will, quietly; "but"—looking her steadily in the eyes—"before I go I'd like to ask how the kid is getting along."

Again the woman started and flushed.

"The *kid*!" she haughtily repeated. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, marm, you do," the boy retorted, his eyes beginning to blaze dangerously. "You know me, and I know you; and I'm going to know how that *kid* is before I go."

"I tell you I do not know what you mean," the woman returned, with cool effrontery. "I never saw you before in my life; and as for *kids*—we do not keep such things on the place."

"Oho! So this is your place, is it?"

Will observed, and glancing curiously up at the towers and chimneys that were visible among the trees. "So this is the fine home the little chap was to have. Well, it is rather grand, that's a fact. But how is he, anyway?"

"Boy, I do not understand your nonsense at all. Just take your dog and be off, or I will call one of the servants to drive you away," was the overbearing response of Mrs. Anthony Plympton, who, having returned from Saratoga the day before, had strolled down to this cool, charming spot—whither she had been followed by her pet kitten—for an hour's quiet reading.

"Yes, marm, you *do* understand me," Will firmly returned. "You know me just as well as I know you, Mrs. Anthony Plympton."

"Ha! Boy, who told you that?" sharply questioned Inez, in a startled tone, and for the moment thrown off her guard.

"Nobody; I found it out for myself," the lad replied. "I don't want to make trouble," he went on, gravely, "and if you'll just tell me that the baby is well and happy, I'll clear out, and welcome."

"Oh, it is a *baby* you have been talking about! Why don't you call things by their right names? *Whose* baby, if you please?" sneered the insolent woman, her eyes blazing hatred upon the resolute boy before her.

"Well, then, if you want the whole story, I can tell it," cried Will, in a loud, angry tone. "I'm asking after the baby that I *sold* you last winter in New York—yes, it was *sold*," he added, flushing as

she made a gesture to silence him, "for you"——

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, hush!" commanded Inez Plympton, glancing round her in alarm.

"Well, but it's true," persisted Will, obstinately, for he had been thoroughly roused by her arrogance. "You know I took the baby to you for the sake of getting him a good home, because my mother was dying, and there wasn't anybody to take care of him; you gave me an envelope with a hundred-dollar bill in it to take to mother, and I've felt ever since as if I had sold my brother to you."

"Hush!" commanded Inez, sternly. "If you ever refer to that transaction in my presence again, I'll"——

She checked herself in the midst of her threat, and then continued, in a more moderate tone:

"No one would ever believe such a statement if you should make it, for you have no means of proving it true. Is—is your mother dead?" she concluded, curiously.

"Yes, she died the next day," Will answered, with a moody face.

"Well, you must never come here again. By the way, how do you happen to be here now?" queried his companion, anxiously.

"I got run over by a train; my foot was hurt, and a kind lady asked me to come and stay in the country until it got well."

"Humph! You'd better go now," said Inez, impatiently, "and you must *never* speak to me again, no matter where you see me. I do not mind, for once, telling you that the baby is doing splendidly; but, of course, you can never see him. If—if," she added, hesitatingly, "you will promise never to recognize me again, and never tell *anybody* where I got the baby, I'll give you another hundred dollars—— Ha! Heavens! Basil Meredith!"

CHAPTER VII.

The shriek and startled exclamation to which Inez Plympton had given utterance was caused by the sudden appearance of Mr. Meredith, as he emerged from behind

the great boulder and stepped to Will's side.

Her face had blanched to the hue of death, and a wondering expression had leaped into her eyes, mingled with something of hope and exultation, as they rested upon the stalwart, splendid form of her old lover and she realized that he was well again!—yes, perfect in every outline of his form, and handsomer than she had ever seen him.

"Will, take Rex and go back to Mrs. Plympton; I will follow you presently," he said, in a low tone that was inaudible to Inez, but which made her cringe with fear, as she realized that they knew each other. The boy gave a quick, wondering glance into the man's grave face; then, whistling to Rex, who drooped his ears resignedly—after one last look at his captive in the maple—and obeyed the call, he disappeared from the scene.

"Basil!" wonderingly repeated Inez Plympton as he turned to face her again.

"Yes," he coldly returned; "you are surprised to see me quite myself once more."

"Oh, how glad I am!" she breathed, with passionate earnestness. "It is miraculous! How was it accomplished?"

"I have not the time to go into particulars," he responded in the same tone as before; "I simply wish to ask you how you happen to know William Browning; then I will go."

"William Browning!" she repeated, with a vacant stare. "Oh!" she added, with a start, "do you mean that boy? I don't know him at all. His dog chased my pet kitten, and"—

Basil Meredith interrupted her with a gesture of disgust.

"Pray do not violate your conscience by dealing in such subterfuge," he said, his lips curling with contempt. "I happened to overhear some of your conversation with him, and so know, from your own words, that you have met him before."

"You heard!—what?" Inez gasped, with paling lips.

"Enough to prove to me that you have been indulging in some very sharp practice."

"I do not understand you," was the haughty rejoinder.

"Very well; then we will let the subject rest for the present," said Mr. Meredith, quietly, and turning as if to leave the place.

"Basil!" Inez called, the sharpness of keen pain ringing through her tone.

"Mrs. Plympton?" he said, pausing and looking back at her.

Her face was as colourless as her dress, and almost convulsed with anguish; her eyes rested upon him with a passionate yearning which betrayed that her whole soul was reaching out after him.

"Well?" he asked, beginning to feel very uncomfortable under that fixed look that expressed so much.

"Oh, how were you cured?" she breathed, with trembling eagerness. "Tell me about it. How is it that you are your old self once more?"

"Through the goodness of God," he reverently answered, as he lifted his hat from his head.

He looked so noble, so grand and manly in the act, that Inez involuntarily stretched out her hand to him in a gesture of earnest appeal.

"Basil! Basil!" she called, her voice full of thrilling tenderness, "it seems as if the last five, cruel years must have been a dreadful dream—as if I have suddenly awakened to find that you have come back to me, your own dear self once more."

"Come back to you?" he repeated, flushing to his brows, a shiver of repugnance creeping over him. "Really, Mrs. Plympton, you must be dreaming still, if you can imagine that such a thing could be possible."

"Could it not be possible?" she cried, huskily. "Oh, Basil! if you only knew what our separation cost me! I have never been myself since the day we parted—I have never known even one moment of happiness. Ah, Heaven! that a cident cost me dear!"

He stood regarding her with undisguised wonder during this impassioned speech—wonder that she could so forget her womanly pride and delicacy as to sue now for what she had once so ruthlessly cast aside as worthless.

"I at least know from what it *saved* me," he coldly responded when she paused.

"*Saved* you! What?" she cried, sharply.

"A life of bitter regret—an existence of untold wretchedness," he briefly replied.

Then, turning abruptly, he walked rapidly back over the way he had come, his stern, set face full of loathing and contempt.

Inez Plympton uttered a cry of despair as he passed from her sight, and, sinking upon the ground where she stood, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed like a passionate, disappointed child who had been refused some coveted toy.

She had loved Basil Meredith, during the days of their engagement, with a sort of wild, ungovernable idolatry; his handsome face, his splendid physique had appealed irresistibly to her sensuous love of beauty; while his brilliant mental attainments, his wealth and social position had roused a feeling of exultation over having won for herself what so many others were coveting.

But for the fearful accident which had so maimed him, she would doubtless have married him and gloried in the fact that she had secured the proud and kingly man for her husband.

But it was an entirely different matter when he arose from the terrible illness that followed what had almost proved a tragedy, and presented him—before her, a hopeless cripple—as they had both believed—with a firm faith in her, and that she would fulfil her promise to him, even though he generously offered to release her.

To be sure, he still had his wealth, and his position in society was in nowise affected by his deformity; people respected and admired him, just as much as ever, for his moral worth, while the beauty of his face had not been marred in the least, except that it had been somewhat refined through suffering. But the woman who should have been truest and tenderest in this hour of trial shrank from him with loathing; she shivered whenever he came into her presence—she could not bear that even his hand should touch hers.

He was quick to discern the repugnance

in her face and manner, even before she coarsely told him that she could never marry one so physically deformed, and his love for her had died, then and there; it was as if some vandal had, with one sweep of a brush, wiped out of existence a beautiful picture, although the death-struggle of his love had seemed almost like rending his own soul from his body.

But now he was well again! His form had recovered, in some marvellous way, its magnificent proportions; there was not even a trace of the previous deformity; indeed, he seemed more attractive in every way; there was an impressive dignity about him, a refinement of expression on his handsome face that she had never seen before; and her soul yearned for him with a passionate craving that was beyond description.

She had been keenly conscious, also, that he now regarded her with abhorrence and contempt; that his aversion for her was even greater than she had ever experienced for him; that he regarded her, from a moral point of view, as a thousand times more deformed and unsightly than he had ever been physically.

She had read it in every line of his expressive face, in the cold, critical glance of his eyes, and heard it ring forth in every contemptuous tone of his deep, rich voice.

She sat there upon the ground, weeping bitterly for a long time; while she began to realize something of the poverty of her life and soul—the shallowness and depravity of her nature.

She possessed houses and lands and gold in abundance; she had silks, velvet, laces, and jewels; she had the *entrée* to the most fashionable society, where she was regarded as a brilliantly beautiful woman; but, with all this, she was bitterly conscious that her existence was barren of everything that was really worth living for—of love, of principle, of self-respect, and—worse than all else—of hope; for she knew that while she lived she would love Basil Meredith with a hopeless idolatry that would embitter every hour of her existence; that she would yearn for him with a heart-hunger that would never be satisfied.

"Bah!" she cried, at last, when she could weep no more, and becoming angry with herself for having weakly betrayed herself so much, "I am like a baby crying for the moon; but, oh, if I had dreamed that he could be cured, I never would have given him up. I wonder how it came about. When I saw him last, in Paris, he was just the same as before his treatment there. I wonder, too," she went on, thoughtfully, "how much he heard of that conversation between the Browning boy and me? What a piece of ill-luck that he should appear here just at this time! I should like to know who the lady is who invited him to stay with her. And how does it happen that Basil is also here, and—Heavens! *they knew each other!* Can it be that *she* is the load-star that has drawn Basil hither? that *she* has been the good Samaritan to that boy? If I thought that, the best thing for me to do would be to sail for Europe by the next steamer."

She started excitedly to her feet, and, with a face expressive of deep anxiety, walked rapidly towards the house.

Meantime, Mr. Meredith, with Will and Rex, had rejoined Ruth, and, a few moments later, the little party were on their way home.

While Ruth was getting her tired and sleepy little girl to bed, Basil sought Will, who was sitting in the back porch, thoughtfully whittling a stick, to question him regarding his recent conversation with Inez Plympton.

He had overheard enough of it to become convinced that the woman had adopted and palmed off upon the public some child to pose as heir to the Plympton estate; and he felt sure that this child was in some way connected with the friendless waif who had so strangely become Ruth's protégé.

"Will," he remarked, by way of opening the subject, "do you know what bribery is?"

"Yes, sir; it's selling yourself to—the devil for money," responded the boy, flushing, and giving the stick in his hands a vicious cut with his knife.

"Well, that is a pretty broad statement," said Basil, smiling, "but I am not

sure it is not the truth. Now, do you mind telling me what that woman was trying to bribe you to do to-day, when she offered you a hundred dollars?"

Will hitched uneasily in his seat. He did not really want to betray Mrs. Plympton, for various reasons; although he had no love for her—in fact, he had conceived a bitter hatred towards her.

There was a rude sense of honour in his make-up which prompted him to preserve her secret, for he believed it concerned no one save himself and her. He had used the money which she had given him to ensure his mother a decent burial and mark her grave with a headstone, and this—even though, as he told her, he felt as if he had sold his little brother—had been a great comfort to him. Thus he shrank from betraying her; while, too, he did not wish anything to interfere with the promising future of his young brother.

"But I—I didn't take it, sir," he said, after hesitating a moment, and shooting a half-defiant glance at his questioner.

"No, you did not accept the hundred dollars she offered you, and I hope you wouldn't allow yourself to be bribed to do wrong under any circumstances," Mr. Meredith gravely replied. "But, Will, I have certain reasons for wishing, very much, to know why she should offer you such an amount."

"Well, sir, I guess, as long as I didn't take it, I've got honesty enough in me to do the fair thing; so I'd rather not say any more about it, although I just hate her like—the devil!" he concluded, with flashing eyes and another vindictive cut at his stick.

Mr. Meredith regarded him with astonishment at this outburst; but he liked him none the less for the sense of honour that he manifested, in spite of his evident dislike of the woman.

He sat in deep thought for a few moments. Finally, turning to the lad again, he quietly remarked:

"Will, I'm going to tell you a true story, and when you have heard it I want your opinion of it. Over three years ago Mr. Anthony Plympton and his first wife—the lady you saw to-day was the

second—lived over yonder in that fine place. They had one son, who married a very sweet, lovely little lady. But she was poor, so the proud old gentleman refused to sanction the marriage, and discarded his son on account of it. The young man and his pretty wife went to Europe, whither they were followed by a woman, who had been disappointed in her expectation of becoming young Mr. Plympton's bride, and who was so enraged over the fact that she vowed that she would ruin the lives of the couple. She kept her word; she made trouble between them, and finally lured the husband to leave his wife and go with her to Rome. Soon afterwards Mr. Plympton sickened and died, when Miss Gordon—the woman who had succeeded but too well in her plot—sought out the wronged wife and taunted her with having fulfilled her vow to wreck her happiness. Then the young widow came home to America with her little child, went to her husband's father, and claimed protection for herself and her baby. He abused and insulted her, refusing to give her even a dollar, or to acknowledge the little one as his grandchild, although young Mr. Plympton had left a fortune of his own; so the poor little widow was driven to work for their living. Mr. Anthony Plympton went immediately abroad, to learn, if possible, further particulars regarding his son's death, and when he returned brought a new wife with him—the Miss Gordon who had ruined his own son.”

“Thunder! was it *her* over yonder?” Will here interposed in astonishment.

“Yes, and since her husband's death—he died last winter—she has again taunted the son's wife with her triumph over her, and also with the fact that *her* son will inherit the property which otherwise would have belonged to her little daughter.”

The boy here suddenly sprang to his feet, his whole face aflame.

“Is it *her*—my Mrs. Plympton—that you've been telling me about?” he cried, in great excitement.

“Yes, Will; it is the kind lady who has done so much for you.”

“And—and little Hope? Has *she* got to lose all the money that she ought to have had because of that other baby over yonder?” he pursued, with quivering lips, and trembling from head to foot with repressed feeling.

“Yes; but for the young heir, most of that property would belong to Hope—that is, if our Mrs. Plympton could prove that she was the legal wife of Mr. Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton.”

“Oh, gosh!” interposed the boy, with a wild gesture and an explosiveness that caused Mr. Meredith to give a violent start and regard him with amazement.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LOST IS FOUND!

After giving utterance to his startling expression, Will Browning sank back within the porch, where he had previously been sitting, looking glum and dejected.

“I overheard enough of your conversation with Mrs. Plympton to-day,” Mr. Meredith resumed, as he regarded him curiously, “to arouse my suspicions that the child which she has represented as the heir to Mr. Anthony Plympton's great wealth is not her own, but an impostor. Now, Will, if such is the case, and you know the truth, it is your duty to reveal the fact. I am about to begin legal proceedings, in the hope of being able to recover Mr. Ralph Plympton's private fortune for our little Hope; but if we could prove that Mrs. Anthony Plympton has foisted a spurious heir upon the world, we might be able to secure a great deal more than that for her.”

“But—but what would become of the little chap over yonder, if you proved that?” Will questioned, with a very crest-fallen air. “Maybe he'd be thrown out in the cold, and have to go to some 'sylum.’”

Mr. Meredith searchingly regarded the boy's flushed, downcast face.

He more than half suspected the truth, and felt assured that a great point would be gained for Ruth if he could get to the bottom of his story.

“Will,” he said, gravely, “I am strongly inclined to believe that this

baby, who is known as Master Anthony Plympton, is in some way related to you—a younger brother, perhaps. You have told me you have no parents, no brothers or sisters; but what I heard this afternoon makes me think that it may not be quite true."

"Humph!" ejaculated the lad, looking very uncomfortable.

"Suppose that I should promise that—if that baby has no right over there—he should be generously provided for; that, instead of being sent to an asylum, he shall be well educated and have a good start in life, when he is old enough to look out for himself; suppose, as I have already planned, that you, also, should be sent to some good school for the next few years, then to some business to fit you for an honourable future: would all that be any inducement to you to tell me all that you know about this child which Mrs. Anthony Plympton claims is the heir to her husband's wealth?"

Will Browning sat for several moments without replying. His face was clouded, his eyes troubled, his air dejected, while he continued to whistle nervously at his stick, which was fast dwindling to nothing under the operation.

At last he looked up at his companion.

"I wish you hadn't said that," he remarked, "for it seems almost like—like"—

"Like bribing you from the other side?" questioned Mr. Meredith, smiling. "No, it isn't, Will," he continued, seriously; "for I am only asking you to help me to right a great wrong, while that woman was trying to bribe you to conceal a crime."

"I didn't mean that," said the boy, flushing. "I meant that I didn't need to be hired to do anything for our Mrs. Plympton, when she has been so kind to me. I'd go through fire and water for her, I would; and I hate the other one. But do you think that little Hope would be sure to get the property if it wasn't for that other child?"

"Well, of course I am not sure," Mr. Meredith returned; "there are some grave obstacles in the way. For one thing, Mrs.

Plympton was unfortunate enough to lose her certificate of marriage, and"—

"Jehoshaphat! I thought so!" shouted Will, throwing knife and stick to the ground, and bounding to his feet. "Where did she lose it?"

"In New York, just about three years ago, while stopping at the Ellsmere Hotel."

"Hooray! I've got it! I've got it!" Will breathlessly exclaimed, and then darted away into the house, and upstairs to his room, with all possible speed, leaving Mr. Meredith speechless with amazement, and actually feeling weak from the shock and thrill that swept over him at the boy's words.

In less than five minutes Will was back again, but panting from haste and excitement.

"Here it is! this is it!" he cried, as he thrust a folded paper into Mr. Meredith's hand.

The gentleman knew that it was parchment the moment he touched it, and his heart gave a great throb of joy.

"What do you mean? Where did you get it?" he questioned, in a scarcely audible voice, and with unsteady lips.

"I found it in one of the rubbish casks, at the back of the Ellsmere Hotel, three years ago in September," Will explained. "My mother knew how to write, and I wanted to learn, but we were too poor to buy paper or copybooks, so I used to go to the rubbish casks for old letters to practise on, and to get stamps, too. One day I found that, and I thought the back of it would be fine, there was so much of it, and it was so nice and clean. I put it away, and didn't think any more about it until one night I got it for mother to set me a copy. She said it was too bad to use it, for it was a marriage stiffiket, and somebody would feel awful because it was lost."

"Why didn't you take it to the hotel and make some inquiries to ascertain who had lost such a paper?" Basil questioned.

"I would, sir, only the man who kept it when I found the paper had died, and somebody else had bought it; so I knew it wouldn't be of any use."

"It is wonderful; and it seems very

strange that you should have kept it so long," said Mr. Meredith, musingly, as he unfolded the precious document and read there the confirmation of his hopes; for it was indeed Ruth's marriage certificate, which she had thrust between the leaves of the Bible three years previous, on her wedding-day.

"Yes, sir," Will returned, "there has been something curious about it, for lots o' times I've started to throw it away; but, somehow, I couldn't—it didn't cost anything to keep it; I kind o' took to the high-sounding names on it, and so I've always put it back, with some other things belonging to mother that I wanted to keep."

"I wonder you haven't thought of it before, and said something about it to Mrs. Plympton," Basil remarked.

"I did think of it," said Will, "and I started to ask you if there was any more to her name that day you came to the hospital to see me; but there was only 'Mrs. Ralph Plympton' on her card, and I didn't want to pry into anybody's business. When, a little while ago, you told the whole of it to me, you could have knocked me down with a feather, for then I knew the paper belonged to her."

"Well, Will, it will prove of great value to her," Mr. Meredith observed, with an eager note in his tones; "it will establish her claim and that of little Hope to a large amount of property—the little girl will be quite an heiress."

"Oh, sir, do you think so?" exclaimed Will, with animation.

"I know it, my boy; had she possessed this certificate before, she might have won her case long ago."

"Who'd think that a bit of paper like that could mean so much?" said the lad, regarding it with a wondering look.

"Well, I hope you do not begrudge your kind friend the good that it will bring her," responded Basil, regarding him searchingly.

"No, sir. I was a little upset for a minute, when I first took it in, that the little chap up yonder would lose his fine home and fortune," the boy confessed, in a deprecating tone; "but it's all right—I wouldn't want him to shove anybody

else out of what belonged to them—least of all *her*. As for the other one, I'd as lief she'd be a beggar as not," he concluded, with flashing eyes, and shaking one clenched fist in the direction of Hazelwood Heights.

"Will, why do you hate Mrs. Anthony Plympton?" Basil inquired, with some curiosity.

"Because, sir," he responded, straightening himself, his cheeks suddenly flaming a bright scarlet, "she slapped me in the face one day—it was the very day that I found that paper—and I was so tearing mad that, if I'd been a man, I believed I could have *killed* her on the spot."

"Tut, tut, my boy," said his friend, reprovingly; "you should never allow yourself to get into such a passion, for that is the kind of temper that makes murderers."

"I know it, sir," the lad replied, in a quieter tone, "and I never felt quite like that towards anybody else; but she left three great marks on my face, that showed for a week, and the boys all hooted at me and declared that I'd had a fight with my 'old woman.'"

"Well, well, I wouldn't dwell upon it if I were you," Mr. Meredith observed, kindly, "and try, also, not to regard the restoring of Mrs. Ralph Plympton's rights as a matter of revenge on your part. Hatred and malice always recoil upon the hater. Be simply glad that justice will be done to your kind friend, and let the matter drop there. Didn't you recognize her when you took your little brother to her for adoption?"

"Yes, sir," Will confessed, with some confusion; "I knew her the moment I set eyes on her."

"I almost wonder, then, that you were willing to give that baby to her," said Basil, in surprise.

"I just *had* to," said the boy, with a deep sigh; "mother was dying, and *something* had to be done with the baby. We saw the advertisement in the paper, and mother thought if we could get the chance, it would be so much better than sending him to any 'sylum. I'd half a notion to take him away, when I found

out who wanted him; but she said he was to be her son—that he'd have everything he wanted, and a great fortune by-and-by; so, I thought, maybe, it would be better to let him go. Do you think she will throw him out when she finds out about that?" he concluded, pointing to the certificate.

"I am quite sure she will," Basil returned, "for, of course, her only object in advertising for a child was to enable her to retain possession of her husband's property; and I am very confident that she will not wish to be burdened with such a care when she learns the truth. But, I assure you, Will, your little brother shall be well cared for, and possibly he may grow up to be a better man under different training from what Mrs. Anthony Plympton would be likely to give him."

"I'm sure of it, sir; and—and if we could only live together, I"—

Will got thus far, and was obliged to stop, in order to preserve his composure; but his downcast eyes and quivering lips plainly betrayed the sense of loneliness and desolation he experienced, in not being able to claim kinship with a single being in the world.

"You shall, Will, if I can arrange it," Mr. Meredith kindly responded. "As long as you show a disposition to do right, and strive to make the most of yourself, you may count upon me as your friend to help you both on your way."

"Thank you, sir," said the boy, gratefully; "I'll do my best—I will, on my word."

"That is the talk," his companion cheerfully remarked. "Now I am going to tell Mrs. Plympton what you have told me; meantime you might step over to the office for the evening letters," he concluded, as he caught the sound of Ruth's step on the stairs.

Will immediately started out upon his errand, while Basil returned to the front porch to await the coming of his betrothed.

"Sweetheart," he observed, as she came out and drew a chair to his side, "I wonder what you will say to some news that I have for you."

"News!" repeated Ruth, in smiling surprise.

"Yes, something that is going to affect your future prospects very materially."

"Ah!" she said, glancing fondly up into his face, "my future prospects! You do not say *our*, and I am afraid I have not much interest in anything apart from you."

Basil bent a luminous smile upon her, and reached out to clasp the pretty hand near him—the one that wore the seal of her betrothal, a large glittering diamond of great value.

"Possibly you may feel something more of interest when you learn what I have to tell you," he remarked. "I have seen Iuez Plympton to-day."

"Can that be possible? Ah, yes; we were very near Hazelwood Heights this afternoon!" Ruth exclaimed, but losing a little of her colour as she recalled the fact of his absence while searching for Will.

The mere thought, too, of the woman who had so wronged her always depressed her.

"I did not speak of it before, dear," Basil continued, "because there were certain things of which I wished to assure myself before doing so."

He then proceeded to relate how, when he had gone in search of Will, he had come suddenly upon Iuez and the boy, and had overheard a secret of vital importance. Then he repeated the facts regarding the advertising for and adoption of the child to represent the heir to the Plympton property, as Will had just given them to him.

"Why, Basil, can it be possible that the woman descended to anything so ignoble as that?" Ruth exclaimed.

"It is only on a par with many other acts of her life," he replied, with quiet scorn. "I am not at all surprised. The only thing that strikes me as remarkable is the *discovery* of the fact."

"True; that seems perfectly wonderful," Ruth answered. "But for Will we would never have learned the truth. To think that the simple fact of my befriending the poor child at the time of his accident in New York should have resulted in

such a disclosure! It is the strangest thing in the world."

"Think nought a trifle, though it small appear;
Small sands the mountain, moments make the year,"

Basil smilingly quoted; then added, with gentle reverence, 'I never count it a little thing to lend a helping hand to any one in distress, for such deeds always bring the Master's blessing.'

"But, even with the discovery of these facts, will it not be still difficult to prove Hope's title to the property? I am almost sorry that you have attempted it," Ruth remarked, a shadow of anxiety sweeping over her face.

Somehow she shrank with great repugnance from the publicity which these legal proceedings were likely to entail. She was so happy in the present, she could not bear the thought of having it marred by a rehearsal of her wretched past.

"No," said Basil, gravely, "there will now be no difficulty in proving all that we wish to prove. I have already received a copy of the list of passengers who sailed in the *Germanic* when you went abroad. That of itself proves that Ralph Plympton acknowledged you as his wife. I have also letters from two gentlemen who were our fellow-passengers, and who state that you were introduced to them as such by your husband; while before the case comes to trial I hope to have a statement from the proprietor of the hotel where you spent several months in Paris, proving that you were registered and lived there as Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Plympton; and"—

"But, ah! if the clerk who was a witness of the ceremony could be found!" Ruth interposed, with a sigh.

"We do not need him, dear," said Basil, with a tender smile; "we do not need anything now but—*this*. Love, you will hardly credit the statement when I tell you that your marriage certificate is found!"

And as he concluded he slipped it into the hand he held.

"Basil!" cried Ruth, in startled accents, "that cannot be possible after all this time."

"Indeed, it is not only possible, but here is the tangible fact," he said, as he touched the paper which he had just put into her hands. "Look at it, love, and see for yourself."

She tried to unfold it, but her hands shook like leaves with nervous excitement.

"Oh, is it true?" she murmured. "Can the fact be established that I was a legal wife? Can it be proved that my child is justly entitled to her father's name?"

Basil gently took the fluttering paper from her grasp, and spread it out before her.

"Read, dear—read the blessed assurance," he said, tenderly.

Ah, there could be no doubt of it, for there, in unmistakable characters, together with the signature of the justice, "Nathaniel Grant," and that of his clerk, "Elbridge Wetmore," affixed, were the names of Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton and Ruth Elizabeth Reynolds, representing the parties that had that day been joined in lawful wedlock by the above-named justice.

"Oh, where did you get it?" Ruth cried, a sob of thankfulness bursting from her as she realized that the priceless document was no myth, but a blessed, self-evident fact.

And then Basil told her how, when and where it had been found.

"And we are indebted to Will for this also!" the happy woman exclaimed, when he had concluded. "It is wonderful. Verily, I have been entertaining an angel unawares!"

Basil laughed out with amusement.

"Dearest," he said, "I am afraid that our poor little waif is a very doubtful angel as yet. There is altogether too much of the old Adam about him to admit of his figuring—creditably—with the celestial host for some time to come. However, we will give him all the honour that is his due, and try at least to make a respectable man of him—to prove to him that we appreciate his agency in bringing about the present promising state of affairs."

"Indeed we will. Ah, Basil, my cup is

full! I have nothing more to wish or ask for," Ruth observed, with deep emotion.

"I have—one thing more," he tenderly returned, as he lifted her hand to his lips—"to call you *my wife*. Then, indeed, will our happiness be assured. I shall take this important document to our attorney the first thing on Monday morning," he added, after a moment. "And I think we must act very quickly in what we do, or Mrs. Anthony Plympton will give us the slip and be off to regions unknown."

CHAPTER IX.

"I AM DETERMINED TO FIGHT THE CASE."

Instead of returning to New York on Sunday evening, as he had felt obliged to do of late, Mr. Meredith remained, and paid his lawyer an early visit the following day.

Having given him an account of all that had occurred on Saturday afternoon, and the revelations that had resulted from his meeting with Inez Plympton; having also produced the long-lost certificate, Mr. Silsby agreed with him that proceedings should be immediately instituted against the woman.

Accordingly, the lawyer betook himself at once to Hazelwood Heights to pay the interesting widow a visit.

He found that he had acted none too soon, for the house was in great confusion, while several trunks stood in the hall and warned him that his bird was meditating an early flight.

He was confirmed in this belief when the servant, to whom he gave his card, told him it was doubtful if her mistress would see him, as she was very busy preparing to go abroad.

Mrs. Plympton did send word down to him that she was engaged and could see no one; whereupon Mr. Silsby wrote a few words upon another card, which resulted, as he expected, in bringing the lady into his presence with hot haste. She entered the room as haughtily as an empress, her black eyes flashing defiance upon the intruder.

"Well, sir," she coldly remarked, without even the formality of saluting the gentleman, "what do you want? This is an unpardonable intrusion at such a time."

"I regret very much to have put you to any inconvenience, madam," the lawyer suavely remarked, "but it has become my duty to explain to you that your claim to this estate is about to be contested."

"Indeed! It is to be Plympton *versus* Plympton, I suppose?" she sneered.

"Yes, madam; I have been instructed to act for Mrs. Ralph Plympton," was the polite response, "and, not knowing the name of your attorney, I was compelled to lay the case before you personally. It is desirable to have the matter settled as early as possible. If—ah—if some amicable arrangement could be managed, it might save time, expense, and publicity."

"An amicable arrangement!" flashed back Inez, in a passion. "That means, I surmise, that I am to quietly relinquish my rights here for 'a consideration,' taking what my opponent may see fit to give me."

"No, madam, not exactly that," returned Mr. Silsby, without the slightest appearance of being ruffled by her ungraciousness. "My client has no desire to take any unfair advantage; but some arrangement might be made, with the advice of your own attorney—subject, of course, to your sanction—which might save publicity"—

"Publicity regarding what?" haughtily interposed his companion.

"Of certain facts, madam, that have recently come to light in connection with Mrs. Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton's right to a share in the property of her late husband and his father."

Mr. Silsby reeled off the above names with evident satisfaction.

"What are the facts?" Inez curtly demanded.

"Pardon me, madam, if I waive that question until later," Mr. Silsby replied. "They will be elucidated at the proper time. I have simply called to learn your attitude and wishes, and to inform you regarding the intentions of my client. Now, if you choose to refer the matter to

your attorney, and authorize him to confer with me, I will retire and not detain you longer."

"But I am going abroad—my arrangements are about completed, and I cannot attend to business of any kind at present," Inez objected.

"Ahem! I regret to have to tell you that I shall be obliged to press the matter in the interests of my client," Mr. Silsby calmly returned. "Madam's journey will have to be delayed, unless she will consent to settle the matter quietly without litigation."

"Settle it—*how*? Tell me just what you claim, and what you want me to do," commanded Mrs. Plympton, flushing angrily at the lawyer's plain speaking and determined manner.

"Certainly," he courteously responded; "my client, Mrs. Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton."

"Why do you keep throwing those names at me?" the woman irritably interrupted. "*She* cannot prove her right to them; she has no way of proving that she was Ralph Plympton's wife."

Mr. Silsby bowed politely, as if to indicate that he would not presume to contradict a lady; then continued:

"As I was about to remark, my client claims, on behalf of her daughter, Hope Reynolds Plympton, the private fortune of the late Ralph Plympton, together with the income that has accumulated therefrom since his death, as well as the accrued interest thereon; also, in default of a will, whatsoever might have been his rightful claim upon the property of the late Mr. Anthony Plympton."

"Well, her claims are *modest*, to say the least, considering the circumstances," sarcastically retorted Inez. "How about the late Mr. Anthony Plympton's *younger* son's share in the said property?" she added, searching the lawyer's face with her keen eyes.

"Ah, ahem! that is a matter that will be investigated later," was the non-committal but somewhat significant response of the shrewd attorney. "Allow me to add, however, that I think it would be for your interest to settle."

"Settle? *Never!* I will fight it out

to the last dollar!" passionately exclaimed the enraged woman. "And, if I am beaten in the end, I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that most of the contested wealth has been frittered away in the struggle to gain my point—there will not be much left for *her*."

An expression of disgust swept over the lawyer's face, but in no other way did he betray that her words had moved him.

"Very well, madam," he said, "if that is your ultimatum, I have no more to say at present. If you will kindly give me the address of your attorney, I will in the future confer with you through him."

"Certainly; Mr. Ladd, of Ladd and James, 310, State-street, is my lawyer," Inez replied, but paling a trifle as she made the statement.

"Thank you," Mr. Silsby returned, and rising, politely bowed himself out and left the house.

"What does all this mean?" Inez Plympton hoarsely exclaimed, as she heard the outer door close after him.

On Saturday, Basil overheard something of that conversation, and to-day I am informed that Ruth Plympton has instituted proceedings against me. I believe it is as I feared—he is visiting *her*—perhaps he is even going to marry her. Oh"—starting wildly to her feet—

"I could never bear *that*—*never*—*never!* She shall not triumph over me a second time like that. Oh, how handsome he is!—a hundredfold more so than when he sued for my hand. Ah, why could not I have been faithful to him? If I had dreamed it possible for him to be cured, the tortures of the rack would never have made me give him up."

She dropped her face upon her hands with a moan of pain, and then she burst into bitter weeping.

She was finally aroused by hearing a servant moving about in the hall.

"Annette!" she called, as she impatiently dashed the tears from her cheeks.

"Yes, madame," responded the French maid, appearing in the doorway.

"Let Tom take the luggage back upstairs. You can unpack it, and put everything in order. I have changed my

mind; I am not going abroad at present. Do you hear? Then go!" concluded this amiable lady, with an imperative stamp of her foot at the staring servant; and Annette disappeared in search of Tom, but muttering as she went her disapproval of "madame's variabilité."

Inez then re-apsed again into her unhappy musings.

"And that boy—how on earth did he happen to show up here just at this time?" she muttered. "Ha!" she added, with a violent start, and growing white to her lips. "That dog! it is the same one that saved that child from being trampled to death that morning! Heavens! *what* a nest I am likely to get into! With both Basil and that boy to fight her battles, I may find more on my hands than I can manage. *Shall I 'settle'?* I have promised to meet Castillo in London on the 1st of October, to close that other affair, and the two may conflict. Perhaps it *would* be better for me to settle; they would doubtless pay me something handsome to sign off. But *no*"—throwing back her proud head with an air of defiance—"I will fight her to the bitter end. As I said, rather than resign all this to *her*"—glancing round the beautiful and spacious room—"I will fritter it all away in law, and I will revenge myself further upon her by publishing to the world the fact that there is a doubt of her respectability—that even the father of the man who she claims was her husband refused to acknowledge her as Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton's wife. Bah! how glibly that lawyer threw those names at me!"

She paced thoughtfully the length of the room once or twice, then she resumed:

"One thing I know, and that is, she has no certificate to prove her marriage. I wormed that fact out of Ralph while we were in Rome. The man who performed the ceremony is dead; the records are burned. Why, she told me with her own lips, not two short months ago, that she could not prove her position. No, I'll fight her—I'll make the country ring with the history of her elopement, Ralph's desertion, and his father's repudiation of

her. Then we will see if the proud Basil Meredith will want to marry her! I wonder why—if there is any foundation for my suspicion—~~he~~, as not done so before. She would never have rejected him on account of his deformity. Possibly they have been all this time trying to gather proofs for her; but I don't care—I'll fight!" she concluded, desperately.

Having arrived at this determination, she went upstairs to superintend the putting away of the contents of her trunks, which she and her maid had spent all day Sunday in packing.

That same evening Mrs. Plympton received a visit from her own lawyer.

That gentleman informed her that he had been waited upon by Mr. Sisby, in behalf of Mrs. Ralph Plympton, who had laid his case—or as much of it as he chose to reveal—before him, and, after giving the matter his most thoughtful consideration, he would respectfully advise her, in view of the facts presented, to allow the affair to be quietly adjusted.

The haughty woman laughed mockingly in his face at the suggestion.

"You don't know me, Mr. Ladd," she remarked, "if you think I will yield even so much as an inch of ground to that woman. I am determined to fight the case for all that I am worth."

"But, my dear madam, there is only sure defeat before you if you do," objected her counsel; "for, let me tell you, Mrs. Ralph Plympton has a very strong case."

"I am determined to fight, I tell you," she obstinately retorted. "I would contest her claims even if I *knew* I should lose the case. So go on, Mr. Ladd; spend any amount of money—there is plenty of it and I don't care for expense—only let the fight be a brave one."

The lawyer regarded his client in perplexed astonishment at this reckless decision.

He knew that she was of an excitable temperament, but he had never before known her to betray such an obstinate and unreasonable disposition.

He questioned her upon a few points regarding which he wished to inform himself, then took his leave, and returned

to the city to consult with his partner with reference to the defiant attitude she had assumed.

CHAPTER X.

THE WORDS RANG LIKE THE KNELL OF DOOM.

Mr. Ladd made a second visit to Hazelwood Heights, on the afternoon of the day following his first call, and stated to Mrs. Plympton that he had had an important interview with the opposing counsel, and also with Mr. Basil Meredith.

"Mr. Basil Meredith!" Inez interposed, sharply. "What has he to do with this matter?"

"Ah, pardon me. I should have stated, perhaps, that Mr. Meredith intends to marry Mrs. Ralph Plympton within a few weeks, and so has authority to conduct her affairs in connection with her lawyer," Mr. Ladd explained.

Inez Plympton could not have been whiter if she had been dead, as she listened to this confirmation of what she had feared and suspected. But quickly recovering herself, she threw back her head and laughed a shrill, mocking, hysterical laugh.

"So Basil Meredith is going to marry Ruth Plympton!" she sneered; then, observing her companion's look of perplexed astonishment, she continued, apologetically, "Really, Mr. Ladd, you must excuse my seeming levity, but it struck me as singularly amusing that Mrs. Ralph Plympton should be about to sue me for property which she claims on the strength of having been the wife of a former lover of mine, when she is on the verge of marrying another who once sustained the same relation to me."

Mr. Ladd merely bowed, to indicate that he understood the situation, while he also was enlightened somewhat regarding her motives for being so unreasonably desirous of "fighting her opponent to the bitter end."

"Well," she went on, as he did not reply, "I interrupted you, and I suppose that you have something of importance to say to me."

"Yes, I have," the gentleman gravely

replied. "Mr. Silsby has informed me that, out of consideration for you, Mr. Meredith has consented to give away a point of evidence, and you can avail yourself of it if you choose."

"Indeed! Mr. Meredith is remarkably considerate!" bitterly retorted the angry woman. "What is the nature of this 'point of evidence'?"

"It is this," said the lawyer, impressively: "It is known to your opponents, and can be proved, that the child whom you are representing as the heir to the Plympton property is not your own child!"

"Ah, that surely sounds very strong, Mr. Ladd," scornfully responded Inez, with wonderful self-possession, in view of the fact that she was trembling in every nerve, "but it really amounts to nothing, for I can produce the nurse who was with me when my son was born, and who will testify that I gave birth to a boy on the 17th of January."

"Possibly you may be able to do that, but can you also prove that this child is the same?" Mr. Ladd inquired, while his shrewd eyes searched her face. "Mrs. Plympton," he went on, gravely, as he saw her change colour at his question, "this is a very grave matter. Mr. Meredith says that he can produce a New York paper in which there is an advertisement for a male child; not over two weeks old; that he can also produce a boy who, in answer to that advertisement, took his own little brother to you. This boy tells a straight, plausible story; and, to supplement this, Mr. Meredith overheard, only last Saturday, a conversation between you and this same boy, during which you tried to bribe him, by the promise of a hundred dollars, to preserve your secret. Now, if these assertions can be proved, you do not stand the slightest chance in contesting the case; and, besides, if you were found guilty of such an act of fraud, you would be liable to imprisonment for a long term of years."

"Heaven! you don't mean that!" exclaimed Inez, in a voice of horror, and startled out of her dissimulation by the unsuspected danger which now seemed to menace her.

"Mrs. Plympton, you may rely upon what I tell you as being absolutely correct," Mr. Ladd returned, with dignity. "Of course, if I saw the vestige of a hope of your winning the case, I would contest it for you to the best of my ability; but, under the circumstances, it becomes my duty to advise you to settle it privately, since your opponents are willing to grant you that privilege."—

"How exceedingly magnanimous!" interrupted Inez, with a mocking sneer.

"Yes, I certainly regard it so," the gentleman returned, "since Mr. Meredith assured me, upon his honour, that they can bring against you even stronger evidence than what has been revealed. Believe me, Mrs. Plympton, there are very few people who would show you so much consideration—who would not insist upon pushing the case to the extent of the law for the purpose of bringing to justice the author of a crime such as they claim has been perpetrated against them. I wish I might persuade you to be reasonable, and to consider, besides what I have already mentioned, the scandal that would result from such an exposure," he concluded, earnestly.

"Well, as for that matter, the woman who calls herself Mrs. Ralph Plympton may stir up something of a scandal herself by appearing before the public as a claimant of this property," Inez angrily retorted. "She has no means of proving that she was ever married, for she has no certificate of that event; the justice who she claims performed the ceremony is dead; the records are burned; the only witness is missing."

"You are mistaken, my dear Mrs. Plympton, about there being no certificate," said Mr. Ladd. "It was lost, but it has been found—I have seen it."

"Found!" gasped his companion, catching her breath sharply. "It must be a forgery."

"No; it is a genuine document; Nathaniel Grant's signature would be a difficult one to forge, and I have seen it too many times not to recognize it," Mr. Ladd positively affirmed. "Of course, the first thing I demanded when this claim was submitted to me was proof that

Mrs. Ralph Plympton was what she professed to be, and I am sure there is not the slightest doubt of the legality of her marriage with the son of your late husband."

Inez Plympton sank weakly back in her chair at this assurance, her strength and courage forsaking her.

She began to realize that she had become entangled in a net from which it might be very difficult to extricate herself, if she persisted in her determination to "fight."

She also realized that she had been ignominiously defeated in every plot which she had laid for the downfall of her rival; for the alienating of her husband had really been no triumph over Ruth, since it had only resulted in revealing to her the fact that she had never really loved him.

It was a bitter blow, and her arrogant nature could ill brook submission to it. After a moment she drew herself haughtily erect.

"Really, Mr. Ladd, it almost seems that you are arguing in favour of the interests of the opposing party," she said, in a tone of cold displeasure.

"I am not, madam, I assure you," he returned, colouring deeply at the slur; "I am arguing for your interests alone; for, as I have already told you, I do not see the ghost of a chance in this contest. If the case should come to trial, I am very much afraid that I could not save you from expiating a crime; and, for the sake of your late husband, who was my friend as well as my client, I would save the name of Plympton from that disgrace."

"Very well," Inez haughtily responded, "since you so strongly urge it, I will consider the matter of settlement. Upon what terms will they settle?"

"Upon such terms as the law allows every widow—right of dower."

"Really Mrs. Ruth is making a bold stroke for a big stake!" Inez interrupted, in a towering passion. "I will not consent to it," she cried, starting to her feet; "I will not submit to anything so monstrous. My husband intended that I should have the whole of his property;

he utterly repudiated this girl and her child, and it was understood when I married him that I should have everything."

"That may be very true, Mrs. Plympton," said the lawyer; "but if such was his wish, he should have made a will to that effect."

"He did not think it necessary," Inez answered. "He was in perfect health until a few hours before he died, and was looking forward to the prospect of an heir to succeed to his property."

"All the same, it was a very unwise omission not to either settle a handsome sum upon you, or make a will in your favour. I am really very sorry; and if, by any means in my power, I could secure more for you, I would most gladly do so. But Mr. Meredith is inexorable in his demand that the child, Hope, shall have all that rightfully belongs to the nearest of kin."

"It's a shame!—an outrage!" cried the angry woman, stamping her foot with passion.

"Yes, it is hard," Mr. Ladd acquiesced.

"I must think it over—I cannot make up my mind to-day. How much time will they give me?" his companion excitedly inquired.

"Well, I am afraid not very much," replied her counsel. "Mr. Meredith is anxious to have something definitely decided upon at once, as he is contemplating a trip to California about the 1st of September."

"Ha! then they are to be married at that time!" cried Inez, with a start.

"Yes; so Mr. Silsby informs me."

The wretched woman pressed her fingers hard against her temples to still the fierce throbbing that nearly drove her wild. The thought of Basil Meredith's marriage with Ruth Plympton was to her worse than the torture of the rack.

"Well," she observed, impatiently, as soon as she could command herself sufficiently to speak, "how much time can I have?"

"A week or two, perhaps; I will try to stay proceedings to favour you as much as possible," said the lawyer. "But," he added, "I am advised that there must

be no further drawing upon the funds belonging to the estate."

"Very well; I have money of my own," Inez retorted, sharply. "I can get along for a couple of weeks, I imagine, without robbing the Plympton bank account."

Mr. Ladd now rose to go; the situation was becoming exceedingly uncomfortable for him, while he also began to experience a feeling of disgust for this strange, fiery creature, with whom hitherto he had had only the pleasantest relations.

Immediately after his departure Inez Plympton went to her own room, where she threw herself upon the bed, for she was worn out with the evil passions that had been roused within her, while she was also sick at heart in view of Basil Meredith's approaching marriage.

She began to realize also that she must relinquish all right and title to Hazelwood Heights. She would be obliged to leave the beautiful place for ever, for her reign was over. It had been brilliant, though brief, and her fate seemed all the more bitter because of that very fact. She had burst upon Albany society like some splendid meteor, and now she was destined to sink as suddenly into oblivion, while her hated rival would queen it in her place.

Doubtless Ruth would occupy the Heights hereafter as her summer home; her winters would, of course, be spent in Basil Meredith's splendid residence in New York, and she ground her white teeth in impotent wrath as, in imagination, she pictured her, supremely happy in the love of her noble husband, moving about those beautiful rooms which had so recently been fitted up for herself with such lavish expenditure.

"Oh, I could burn it to the ground!" she sobbed, in abject grief. "I wish I dare reduce it to ashes; but of course, if I should, the crime would at once be attributed to me. Ah, if it was not for the hope of revenge, I could almost wish that I were dead!"

The following morning she received a note from Mr. Ladd, informing her that she would be allowed one week in which to make up her mind whether she would contest Mrs. Ralph Plympton's claim in

behalf of her child, or quietly settle the matter as already proposed. He closed by remarking that he "trusted her usual good judgment would lead her to decide in favour of the latter arrangement."

Only one week more! The words rang like the knell of doom in her ears. Not because she was so deeply attached to the place that it would burst her heart to leave Hazelwood Heights. There were other places in the world where she could live and be just as comfortable, and she would by no means be left destitute in surrendering that handsome property, although it caused her a keen pang to feel that her resources were to be so materially curtailed.

But the one thought that was the most prominent, that overbalanced every other feeling and consideration, was the maddening fact that Ruth, the woman whom she so hated and envied, was to supersede her there.

During the whole of that allotted week she remained closely at home.

She did not even go for her accustomed drives; she denied herself to all visitors, while, roving restlessly from room to room—brooding upon the changes which the near future threatened to make inevitable; thinking of the approaching marriage, that, of itself, was almost sufficient to drive her insane—she was as utterly wretched as it is possible to imagine that any human being could be.

The following morning she dressed herself with the utmost care, and drove into the city to give her answer to Mr. Ladd.

Apparently she was in the best of spirits. She was gracious, affable, blooming, and greeted her counsel as if she had never known a ruffle of temper or an occasion for an outbreak of passion.

Yes, she said, she had come to tell him that she would "settle;" but she would like to propose that a stated sum be given to her, rather than what would be likely to accrue to her from her dower-right to one-third of the estate; for she was going abroad to live, and such an arrangement would be more convenient for her. Besides, since there would doubtless always be an unpleasantness between the two branches of the family,

a final settlement would be much more agreeable than to extend their business relations with each other indefinitely.

She would also like to ask, as a favour, that she be allowed to remain at Hazelwood Heights until she was ready to sail, which would not be until about the 1st of October, as something had occurred to interfere with her plans; a change previous to that would necessitate a great deal of trouble and expense to her, while she would engage to leave everything about the mansion and place in the best possible order, and pay whatever rent was deemed right for the few remaining weeks that she would occupy it.

Mr. Ladd expressed himself as pleased with her decision, and promised that he would make the very best arrangements possible for her, and let her know the result at an early date.

So Inez Plympton went her way, with a malicious gleam in her treacherous eyes, and the old mocking smile on her lips.

Mr. Meredith was inclined to insist that she be ordered to give up Hazelwood Heights immediately; but Ruth, always kind and considerate, pleaded that she be allowed to occupy the place until October, as she had requested.

"I do not care to go there at present," she said. "I have all that I can attend to during the next few weeks, without having the care and confusion of moving. So please, Basil, let everything remain just as it is, and when we return from our trip, we will go and look the house over to see what changes we would like made, before taking possession of it next summer."

So Basil yielded, and it was agreed that Mrs. Anthony Plympton should remain mistress in the home where, for more than a year, she had reigned it right royally, until October.

Mr. Meredith, with Mr. Silsby and Mr. Ladd, consulted together regarding a suitable sum to be settled upon her, in view of her signing away all her interest in the property. An agreement was finally made that seemed fair to them, and then Inez was informed of the amount, and also that her request had been granted.

When Mr. Ladd told her, she smiled viciously, and remarked, with the utmost *sang froid*:

"Well, now that those matters are settled, what is to be done with the baby?"

"The baby!" repeated the lawyer, in wondering amaze. "I don't think I quite understand you."

"Why, since I have no further use for him, I thought, perhaps, Mrs. Ruth Plympton might like to take another protégé."

Mr. Ladd could scarcely conceal his disgust at this suggestion.

"Do you mean that you intend to desert the child?" he demanded. "Have you not adopted it?"

"No; there were no legal formalities," Inez replied, indifferently. "Of course, if everything had run smoothly, I should have kept him for the sake of the property; but since the fraud has been discovered, I do not intend to trouble myself any further about him."

"Have you no affection for the child for whom you have cared so long?" the man wonderingly inquired.

"Well, no. I am free to confess that children are simply odious to me," she unblushingly declared. "As long as he figured as Master Anthony Plympton, and I had the control of his money, I could put up with him. I could keep a nurse for him, and so he really didn't trouble me very much; but now that I have lost the game, I'm not willing to be at any expense on his account, and those who robbed him of his fortune may provide for him, or I'll hand him over to some institution."

The lawyer was speechless before this manifestation of heartlessness, and before he could fully recover himself to make any suggestion regarding the disposal of the poor little waif, Mr. Silsby was announced.

He apologized for intruding, but added that, in his recent interview with Mr. Ladd, he had entirely forgotten to state that Mrs. Ralph Plympton desired him to request that the Browning baby be consigned to her care; therefore he had come personally to ascertain if Mrs.

Anthony would consent to such an arrangement.

"With the greatest pleasure in the world, sir," the woman replied, with a sneering laugh. "I had just intimated to Mr. Ladd that some such disposition be made of the child; Mrs. Ralph Estlake Hartmann Plympton can have him and welcome."

Thus, in less than two hours afterwards, "Master Anthony" was quietly sleeping in little Hope's crib, while Will sat beside him, a smile of infinite content and tenderness illumining his plain but honest face.

After these negotiations were concluded, the excitement attending them subsided, and the days and weeks at the cottage sped rapidly and happily.

Mr. Meredith was obliged to be in New York during the week, but every Saturday evening found him a welcome guest in that quiet little home, every inmate looking eagerly forward to his coming.

Ruth had never been so happy in her whole life as during these few weeks preceding the date set for her marriage.

She was in perfect health; the light of an almost holy joy shone in her eyes; a delicate flush glowed on her cheek, and her smiling lips, her elastic step, all told of a heart at rest and without an anxious care for the future.

She was making elaborate preparations for her marriage, although there was to be no formality about it—nothing but a simple ceremony just previous to starting on the wedding trip.

But Basil insisted upon deluging her with pretty things, and therefore came laden with boxes and bundles upon every visit; while she, now having plenty of money at her command, wished to honour the man she loved by making herself as beautiful in his sight as possible.

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING FOR THE WEDDING.

On the Saturday evening before the 1st of September, which fell on Tuesday of that year, Mr. Meredith visited the cottage, as usual. He always came to tea, after which he spent a few

hours with Ruth, then went for the night to a neighbouring hotel, where he had a room reserved for him, and where he was to remain until Tuesday, the day appointed for his marriage. Sunday was a quiet, delightful day, though very warm; and as the sun began to go down, Basil proposed to Ruth that they should go for a drive.

She assented, and Mr. Meredith went immediately to secure a carriage. He was fortunate enough to obtain a good pair of horses, with an experienced driver, and they had a delightful drive of a couple of hours.

On their return their driver took a road that led past Hazelwood Heights, which, of course, possessed more than usual interest for them now.

"It is a beautiful place," Basil remarked, as he gazed appreciatively over the spacious, well-kept grounds and the handsome, stately mansion; "little Hope will have a noble inheritance."

"Yes," said Ruth, but heaving a gentle sigh; "and yet I have some sorrow for the woman who will have to leave it so soon; it must be a great mortification to her, as well as a great sacrifice, to be compelled to give it up."

"Do not waste your sympathy upon Inez Plympton, my darling," Basil tenderly responded; "she is not worthy of it; she is utterly heartless and devoid of principle. She gained her position in the first place only through intrigue and to carry out a mean purpose of revenge against you; so I feel that she is justly punished. Ah!" he added, as a pair of fine black horses attached to a carriage came dashing round the corner and the great boulder previously described, "I really believe we are going to meet her."

It was even so, and there was no possible way to avoid the encounter.

The advancing turn-out was one belonging to the Plympton estate, and it swept in at the lodge-gates just as Basil and Ruth came up to them.

Inez turned to glance at the equipage, as any one naturally would do; but as she recognized the occupant's terrible look flashed over her face; then a mocking smile wreathed her lips, and a low,

bitter laugh, that had something of malicious triumph in it, came rippling out on the air, causing Ruth to shiver with a vague feeling of dread.

"Do not mind her, dear," said her lover, his face clouding with indignation while he heartily regretted having come into that locality. He could not bear that even a shadow of anything unpleasant should fall upon his loved one just on the eve of her wedding.

He exerted himself to dispel the sensation, and when he finally bade her good night, he had the satisfaction of seeing that every trace of sadness had vanished from her face.

The next day—Monday—was a very busy one, for there was some last packing to be done, and other ante-nuptial arrangements to be attended to.

The cottage, which had been christened "Hope Cottage," was to be retained as a home for Will Browning and his little brother, who, having been shorn of his false honours as Master Anthony Plympton, had been re-named, at the request of Will, Arthur Meredith Browning.

Good Mrs. Barstow, who had always been a kind friend to Ruth, and who had already come to the cottage to assist her, in view of her approaching marriage, was to remain as matron of the home with the two boys.

Mary was to accompany the party to California as nurse to Miss Hope, and to reside with them in New York upon their return from their trip.

The house had been put in the best order, under the supervision of Mrs. Barstow, and on Monday afternoon a neighbouring florist transformed it into a bower of beauty with an assortment of ferns and plants, while it was to be embellished still further on the morrow with cut flowers, for which Basil had given a lavish order.

Upstairs in the pretty front chamber, laid out upon the spotless bed, was the lovely wedding costume of ivory-white satin, tastefully adorned with costly lace, together with the many other dainty things to go with it. On a chair near by hung a beautiful travelling-dress, and beside it, on a small table, were the

pretty hat, gloves, and boots to be worn with it.

Ruth had just completed the arrangement of them to her satisfaction, that everything might be ready on the morrow; and now she stood looking down upon them, a happy smile upon her lips, a tender light in her lovely eyes.

She had felt a strong desire to wear the garments of a bride, and, as Basil had also expressed such a wish, and himself selected the rich material for her robe, she had taken the utmost pains to make it both beautiful and appropriate.

She was to wear no veil because of her widowhood, but everything else suitable for a bride she had provided, even to the orange-blossoms which were caught here and there among the lace on the corsage of her dress.

In her hands she now held Basil's bridal gift—an exquisite white velvet casket that he had just sent up to her, to be put away for safe keeping, but with the charge that she was to wear its contents on the morrow, for his sake.

She opened it, and cried out with delight as her eyes fell upon the treasures thus revealed. They consisted of a full set of jewelry, composed of pearls and diamonds.

The necklace was a unique arrangement of whole pearls, each one set around with clear white stones. There were also ornaments for her ears, and a blazing star to be worn in her hair.

"How perfectly exquisite!" she murmured. "Basil's taste is very dainty. But where shall I find a safe hiding-place for the precious things?"

She closed the case and stood thinking a moment, then slipped it between the mattresses, underneath the bridal finery.

Then she went below and joined her lover in the porch, where he had been enjoying his evening's cigar while she was engaged above. He arose as she appeared, and, drawing her into his arms, held her clasped close to him for a moment or two without speaking.

Daylight had faded, and it was almost dark in the vine-covered porch, and a feeling of deep, almost solemn, joy seemed to pervade the hearts of both as

they stood there, realizing that they were so soon to belong to each other for all time.

"Darling, I am not going to keep you up long to-night," Basil at length remarked. "You must go to rest, for you are very weary, and I want you to be bright and fresh for to-morrow. Is there anything else you can think of that needs to be done?"

"Nothing, Basil; you have been so thoughtful and kind that it seems as if I had hardly had a care," Ruth responded, as, with a sigh of infinite content, she leaned her head back upon his shoulder and gazed fondly up into his face.

"Ah! I hope I may always be able to shield you from all care," he whispered, as he bent to kiss her lips. "Now, sweetheart, I must go; but it will be for the last time. To-morrow, however, you will be all my own, and we will never be parted again."

He folded her more closely to him as he spoke, as if loth to let her go, his lips seeking hers again in a lingering caress, while she, reaching up her arms, laid them softly around his neck.

"Basil! Basil!" she breathed, in a voice that thrilled him strangely.

Fondest words could not have expressed so much of devotion and the depth of her love as that intense repetition of his name.

"How you tempt me to stay a little longer! You are a veritable little hypnotist," he said, laughing, as he gently released her; "but I must resist all such temptation to-night. Now, sleep well, dearest; I must have no pale cheeks or heavy eyes to reproach me in the morning for having allowed you to do so much to-day."

He turned to pass down the steps, then suddenly stopped.

"Ah," he said, "I have left my cigar-case; it is inside, on the hall table."

"Let me get it for you, Basil," Ruth exclaimed, and darted into the house for that purpose.

He followed her and stood by the stairs while she found it.

"Talk of hypnotism! Behold the magic power concealed within this little case!"

Ruth p'ayfully remarked as she shook it at him, and then tucked it with her own hands into the breast pocket of his coat.

This done, she raised herself upon the tips of her toes and voluntarily lifted her lips again for a last caress.

She was so pretty, in her simple white dress, with the rose-coloured light from the hall-shade falling upon her, as she half timidly claimed her reward, that he never forgot the picture as long as he lived.

CHAPTER XII.

AN APPARITION.

Now that Basil Meredith had got his cigar-case, and indulged in a second affectionate "Good night" to Ruth, he turned once more to go, when he was suddenly confronted in the doorway by an apparition that drove every atom of colour from his face and almost paralyzed him with horror.

"Great Heaven!" burst hoarsely from his lips as he staggered back a step or two, putting out one hand as if to ward off a blow, while his eyes seemed almost starting from their sockets.

As he retreated before the strange visitor who had appeared upon the threshold so unexpectedly, Ruth, who was behind him, stepped forward to obtain a view of the intruder, when a shriek of agony burst from her, and she sank, like one stricken with a mortal blow, in a heap upon the floor.

She did not swoon. Ah, no! Her faculties were all alive with a horror so intense, and with such a sense of woe and despair, that death, oblivion, annihilation would have been bliss compared with the suffering of which she was conscious.

Basil was the first to recover himself.

He had seen Ruth fall, and he believed she had fainted. He was even conscious of a feeling of relief in the thought; for now he would have an opportunity of getting rid of that fearful-looking object that still stood in the doorway, surrounded by the beautiful ferns and plants, like a death's-head thrust in among the flowers of Eden.

It was the figure of a man, fearfully emaciated, weak, tottering, trembling, and with a face so scarred and disfigured, that, but for its familiar outlines, it would have been utterly unrecognizable.

The intruder was none other than Ralph Plympton.

"Let me come in," he said, in a hollow tone. "I am weak, and cannot stand."

Indeed, he seemed extremely ill, and so spent that he swayed as he took a step forward, and Basil involuntarily put out his hand to steady him.

A shudder shook him from head to foot as Ralph clutched his arm with one bony hand; but the touch also served to arouse him somewhat, and, hastily closing the outer door, he conducted him into the pretty parlour that had been tastefully decorated for the ceremony to-morrow, and seated him in a chair.

"Stay here," he commanded, in a low, scarcely audible voice; "I must attend to her."

With a face like marble, he returned to the hall and lifted Ruth in his arms. Then he found that she had not fainted; she had simply been shorn of her strength by the unexpected and horrible blow that had fallen upon them.

"Oh, Basil! Basil!" she moaned, as he raised her to her feet, and the tone was full of despair.

His lips quivered, and his chest rose and fell with two or three great throbs of agony. Then, forgetting himself in his anxiety for her, he said gently:

"Ruth, shall I take you upstairs? Will you leave me to talk with—him. Then I will come to you after, and tell you all."

She rested against his breast for a moment, too weak and wretched, just then, to realize that henceforth she would have no right to be there. Then she stood up, gently disengaging herself from his supporting arms.

The act was pathetically suggestive. It was indicative of renunciation—of turning away for ever from all that was beautiful and attractive in life—from love, hope, happiness; and her face was like a piece of marble in its rigid whiteness.

"No," she said, with colourless lips, "I must not shrink from the inevitable. I may as well meet it first as last."

She turned from him with drooping lids, as if she dare not trust herself to look into his face, and walked like one in a dream into the parlour where her husband sat cowering in his chair, as if he realized, but too well, that he was an object repulsive beyond expression.

She passed him, without even glancing at him, and sank upon the sofa on the opposite side of the room, while Basil took a chair near the door.

"I know that my coming here to-night has brought wretchedness to you both," Ralph Plympton began, in a hollow voice, as he glanced deprecatingly from one white face to the other; "I know that it would be far better for us all if I were lying under the sod in Italy, as you have supposed; but it is only right that you should learn the truth to-night—it is better to have the blow fall now than to have allowed you to be shamed in the presence of witnesses to-morrow, as that fiend had planned you should be."

"What do you mean?" questioned Basil, as Ralph was interrupted by a fit of coughing.

"I mean that that *devil* in woman's form—my father's second wife—had plotted to spring a terrible trap upon you to-morrow morning in the midst of a sacred ceremony," Ralph explained; "but, discovering, by the merest chance, how you, as well as I, were being made the victim of her malice, I hastened hither this evening to save you what misery and humiliation I might; though"—with a despairing glance at Ruth's drooping form—"I know that the blow can be none the less bitter on that account."

"Do not look at me, please," he resumed as she moved slightly, while he put up one thin hand nervously to cover his face. "I am but a wretch; I know that I am only a blot on the face of the earth; I am a burden to myself, and a stumbling-block in the way of—of others; but if you will bear with me for a little while, I will tell you my story—the story of my long absence and supposed death, and then you shall judge me as you will."

"You are weak and ill, Mr. Plympton," Basil here interposed, his humanity getting the better of his suffering as he saw how frail and shaken the man was. "Let me get you a glass of wine before you continue your story."

He sprang to his feet, passed out into the dining-room, where he poured out a glass of cherry, which he brought to the invalid; for he could be called nothing else, since he seemed hardly able to sit up.

He accepted it gratefully, and drank it off eagerly.

"Now shall I tell you?" he inquired, after a moment, in a slightly stronger voice. "Can you bear to hear what I have to say, Ruth?"

"Yes," she gasped, but without raising her eyes, while she with difficulty repressed a shudder as he spoke her name.

CHAPTER XIII.

RALPH PLYMPTON'S STORY.

"You have believed me to be dead for more than two years," he resumed; "and doubtless you are wondering why, since I did not die, I have not informed you of the fact long before this. It is simply because I was *dead in life*, if you can comprehend such a paradox; for, until within the last three months, I was as unconscious as you that such an individual as Ralph Plympton still existed. I have not been in my right mind—I have been mildly insane, and an inmate of a lunatic asylum. Let me go back to the time when I was taken ill in Rome," he went on, moistening his dry lips and bowing his scarred face lower. "As soon as my physician discovered the nature of my disease, he ordered me to be taken at once to the plague hospital, where I grew rapidly worse, and, as was supposed, died on the same day with several other patients, when my body was removed to the undertaker's department. It is the greatest wonder—a mere chance—that I was not buried alive: for it was only as I was being placed in my coffin that one of the attendants thought he discovered signs of life about me. I was immediately returned to the hospital.

where everything was done to restore me, and I was saved. A sorry salvation it was, too," he bitterly interposed, and then fell to coughing violently again.

"Yes, it would have been far better if I had died," he continued, when he recovered his breath; "if I could have ended my miserable existence then and there; but, for some reason, it was not to be. My physician, as soon as he found that there was really a chance for me—which was not for a day or two afterwards, since the spark of vitality within me was a very feeble one—tried to communicate with Inez Gordon, who had arranged to have a telegram sent her twice every day during my illness, to report upon my condition; but he learned, to his dismay, that she had left Rome, and as she did not leave any address at her hotel, he had no means of communicating with her, to inform her that the report of my death had been erroneous, and that I was likely to recover.

"It was a long time before health was restored to me, while, mentally, I was a wreck. My mind had become so impaired that I lost all trace of my identity; in fact, was almost an idiot. Consequently, when I became well enough, physically, to be discharged from the hospital, having no friends who knew of my condition and could come to my rescue, and being also destitute of money, the only thing that could be done for me was to send me to a home for the unfortunate. I remained there, like a perfect blank to me, until about three months ago, when a sudden change for the better occurred in my condition, although, as my mental faculties returned, my physical health began to fail. As soon as I realized how I was situated, I wrote to my father, telling him what my condition had been for two years, and asked him to send me funds to enable me to come home. My letter was delayed, as was also the reply to it, which, to my astonishment, was penned by Inez Gordon, who wrote me that after my supposed death my father went abroad, hoping to ascertain further particulars regarding my fate. But he got no farther than Paris, when she, Inez, convinced him that it would be useless to

go on to Rome, as she knew all that was to be known of my illness and death. I cannot conceive how she managed to entrap him, but it seems that she succeeded in her scheme to become Mrs. Anthony Plympton, for they were married only a few months after their meeting. All this she wrote to me, and then shocked me beyond measure by telling me that my father was dead, and had left her mistress of his whole property. She expressed great sympathy for me in my forlorn condition, and, enclosing a letter of credit for a liberal amount, begged me to hasten home at once. I was somewhat puzzled, since she had written from Hazelwood Heights, to find that the letter had been posted in London."

"The fact was that Mrs. Plympton had enclosed and directed an addressed letter to Señor Alfeo Castillo, London, England. She had not dared to send the epistle direct to Ralph from the post office in Albany, lest the truth that he was still living should become known, and thus the fiendish scheme she had in view should be discovered and frustrated.

"I started immediately," Ralph resumed, "and arrived in Albany yesterday afternoon. My father's widow met me at the station, and I entered my old home again just as the sun went down."

"On, were you in the carriage with her?" exclaimed Ruth, with a start, and speaking for the first time since he began his recital.

"Yes; but why do you ask?" Ralph inquired, bending a surprised look upon her.

"Oh, I knew that dreadful woman had some horrible plot in mind, by the way she mocked us as we passed," moaned Ruth, with a shiver, but unheeding his question.

"Ha! then you were in the carriage that passed just as we turned in at the lodge gates," said Ralph, flushing. "I wondered what she was laughing at, but was too wretched to pay very much attention to her. Of course, my first inquiry had been for you, and she had told me that you were living not far from Hazelwood Heights, and that ever since your return you had been supporting

yourself and Hope by doing millinery, and I was miserable in knowing how you had been wronged; but she did not tell me what your plans for the future were. She is a thoroughly bad woman; I can scarcely conceive of any human being cherishing such hatred and malice as she has seemed to nurse, and I was appalled when I came to understand that her only object in sending for me to return, in such haste, was to wreak a contemptible revenge upon you; that her plan was to detain me at Hazelwood Heights until to-morrow morning, and then come here with me just in time to interrupt a marriage ceremony."

"Did she dare contemplate such a dastardly act as that?" Mr. Meredith here exclaimed, in hot indignation.

"She would dare do anything to serve her own purposes," said Ralph, bitterly, "and I might have known that she was not to be trusted; but she fooled me very cleverly. She pretended to be very friendly towards me, and promised to do all in her power to aid me; she even manifested a surprising cheerfulness in relinquishing to me all that rightly belonged to me of my father's estate. I fully intended to come here this morning, to arrange a suitable provision for you and my child," he continued, with a pathetic break in his voice as he referred to Hope, "but I was taken ill during the night, and was unable to rise until late in the day. Then, when I suggested coming to you, she asserted that I was not able—that a few hours could make no difference; meantime she would do her best to brace me up, and would herself drive me hither to-morrow morning. I really was too ill to make any exertion, and so yielded to her, little dreaming why she was so anxious to put me off."

"Towards evening I felt rather more comfortable, and crept out upon the verandah for a breath of fresh air. While sitting there I overheard two of the servants discussing family affairs, and learned that no one in the house knew who I was. I was supposed to be a relative of Mrs. Plympton's, who had come for a short visit, in the hope that country air would benefit me. It seems that Annette,

the maid, knows rather more of her mistress's business than would, perhaps, be agreeable to her, for she revealed the fact that she had imposed a false heir upon my father's solicitors; but the fraud having been discovered, the infant had been turned over to the son's wife, who had been willing to take him under her protection, even though she had been cheated out of her own rights. I also learned that a marriage between a Mr. Meredith and Mrs. Ralph Plympton was to take place to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock."

"Then it burst upon me why I had been so cordially urged to come home; why Inez had been so persistent to keep me from coming here to-day; it even occurred to me that my sudden illness had been of her making, in order to enable her to carry out her plot the more effectually."

"As soon as the servants had finished their gossip, I called Annette to me, told her who I was, and compelled her to reveal to me all she knew regarding the affairs of my family. She was thoroughly frightened, and confessed that she had been in the habit of listening when her mistress had visitors, and so learned many of her secrets. Later, I confronted my father's crafty widow, charged her with her treachery, and she, seeing it would be useless to deny it, unblushingly acknowledged everything. She declared that she meant to crush you both, and that, upon receiving my letter, she had resolved to keep my existence a secret, let you go on and perfect your plans, and at the very moment of their celebration bring me face to face with you, and so humiliate you, and at one fell blow destroy your every hope."

"You can never know what my feelings were on making this discovery," Ralph remarked, after pausing to wipe the perspiration from his brow. "I am not a good man—I know that—I have acted the part of a coward and a villain; but I was shocked, through and through, by the utter depravity of that heartless woman; and, although she has made her boasts that she 'never feared a human being,' I think, for once, she did

fear and shrink before the righteous wrath of the man whom she had wronged beyond all endurance. When I left, I commanded her to leave the house before my return; then I ordered her coachman to harness his swiftest horse and drive me hither. I did not intend to appear before you with such frightful suddenness, however. I alighted at the gate just as Ruth entered the house; I tried to speak your name, Meredith, to prepare you, but my voice failed, and so I could only follow you inside."

IV.

"GREAT HEAVEN! I NEVER CAN BEAR IT!"

"That is my story, Ruth," Ralph continued, after resting a few moments, and, as he spoke, he turned upon her a pitiable look of despair; "this is the explanation of my long absence and silence. As I said before, it would have been far better if I had died, for I would gladly have saved you this crowning sorrow of all that I have caused you. I have no excuses to offer for the past—there can be no excuse for all the wrongs that I have done you. I have been morally weak and vacillating from my youth upwards; I have always insisted upon, always had, my own way; and that of itself has made me selfish and irresponsible. When I married you, I believed I should be faithful to you as long as I lived. I *should* have been faithful if that demon in woman's form had let me alone—if she had not sworn never to rest until she had accomplished my ruin. Even that does not exonerate me, I know. I should have had manliness and strength enough to resist her. Oh, I wish I had died, Ruth! It seems terribly cruel that I should have returned just at this period, to crush you a second time. I do not ask you to forgive me; I know that I have sinned beyond all hope of pardon; but, Ruth," he suddenly burst forth in an agnized tone, "speak to me! Tell me that I have at least done right in coming to you now. Tell me, tell me!"

He turned his face to her—that face so scarred, so disfigured, that she would never have recognized it as belonging to

the proud and handsome Ralph Plympton whom she had married three years previous, but for its outlines, the shape of his head, and the way he wore his hair.

He seemed to have forgotten, for the moment, how unsightly he was, and his eyes were bent upon her with a yearning look that was very pitiable, while he threw out his hand towards her with an appealing gesture that was more expressive than words.

Ruth lifted a quick glance to him, but as quickly averted it, as she replied:

"Yes, you did right to come to-night; I could not have borne it—I believe it would have killed me—to-morrow."

The last word was hardly audible, and Basil Meredith could scarcely repress a groan in view of the anguish that was compressed into her strained, unnatural tone.

"Thank you," Ralph returned, humbly. "But for the exigency of the case, I feel that I have no moral right to inflict my presence upon you at all. I would gladly hide myself from every one who has ever known me until my wretched life wears itself out. I will go now," he said, struggling feebly to his feet. "But, Ruth, could you, will you—may I see my little child, my little Hope, just once?"

His faltering, tremulous request was extremely pathetic, and as he spoke of his little one there was in his tones a yearning tenderness, an intensity of emotion, that brought involuntary tears of sympathy to the eyes of Basil Meredith, in spite of his own bitter suffering.

"Yes," Ruth responded, in a pathetic voice, "you can see her if you like; but she is asleep now; would you care to go up?"—

"Yes, oh, yes, let me, please. I could not bear to see her if she were awake," Ralph hastily replied, as he sensitively covered with one hand the cheek that was deeply scarred. "I could not bear to have her know that I am her father, and see her shrink from me with loathing."

"Come, then; I will show you the way," Ruth gently returned, as she also rose.

She was very calm now—strangely calm, both men thought, although she

looked more like some beautiful spirit than a creature of flesh and blood.

She led the way from the parlour, out through the lobby, up the stairs and past the room where, through the wide-open door, could be seen the dainty braid outfit, for which there would now be no use, to the chamber where, in her pretty crib, the sweet child lay asleep.

The night was warm, and Hope had thrown aside the bed covering, thus revealing one perfectly-shaped foot and leg as far as the knee—only the pretty pink toes of the other being visible beneath her night-robe.

One arm lay slightly curved above her head, the other rested on her breast, the dimpled hand holding a crimson rose that she had begged Ruth to give her on going to bed.

Her golden hair lay in tumbled masses on the pillow, while a few short locks clustered about her flushed face, which would have made an ideal subject, in its perfect repose and beauty, for an artist's brush, as would also the graceful abandon of her attitude.

Ruth turned up the gas, which she always left burning low, as Hope did not like the dark; and Ralph Plympton feasted his hungry eyes upon his child, for whom, since coming to himself, he had yearned night and day, with an insatiable longing.

For ten minutes or more he did not move or make a sound, though hot tears rained from his eyes and dropped unheeded upon the little bed.

Ruth stood silently by, apparently an unmoved witness in her unnatural calmness; but she never forgot the scene—the beautiful sleeping child, so unconscious of her surroundings; the weeping man; the heartbroken woman; renunciation expressed in the attitude of the one—utter despair written upon the face of the other.

At last Ralph Plympton turned away and walked feebly from the room. He was panting and almost exhausted from repressed emotion, on reaching the foot of the stairs, where he was obliged to support himself by the banisters, during a violent attack of coughing.

Ruth passed him, and going into the dining-room, brought him another glass of wine, for which he thanked her, and then eagerly drank it.

"I shall have some business arrangements to discuss with you," he remarked, as he buttoned his overcoat close about his throat, before going out into the night air. "I do not mean to inflict my presence upon you unnecessarily, and if you prefer that I should settle such matters through your lawyer, I will do as you wish; although I would rather not make myself conspicuous, if I can avoid doing so."

"Very well," Ruth quietly replied, "I will confer with you personally, whenever you wish."

"Thank you; and—good night," he said; and, with one last look into that white, beautiful face, he went out, and presently she heard a carriage drive down the street.

Ruth stood where he left her, looking like one paralyzed, her attitude expressive of utter hopelessness; so wholly unlike the bright, piquant, happy little woman that she had been an hour previous, when she had playfully twitted Basil with his fondness for cigars. He had remained in the parlour during her absence up and he could now see her from where he sat, and it seemed to him that he had never known what suffering was until that moment.

His love for Ruth had been the strongest passion, the holiest sentiment—next to his reverence for God—that he had ever known, and now that he had lost her forever, his brimming cup of happiness had been dashed from his lips ere it had touched them, so to speak. And Ruth! how could he bear to think of her in the future as bound to that unsightly object that had appeared before them so unexpectedly that night?

She was already a wife, and henceforth the seal of the law must stand an unsurmountable barrier between them. He must go back to his beautiful but desolate home, and live out his life, a lonely, disappointed, and despairing man.

He arose and went out to her, observing in spite of his pain what a lovely picture

she made standing in her pretty white dress among the plants, with the mellow light from the hall shade falling over her—yes, inexpressibly lovely, notwithstanding her suffering, but lost to him—lost! lost!

She turned at the sound of his step; she lifted her eyes to his face, and something she saw there made her cry out, sharply:

"Basil! Basil!"

She had repeated his name while they were standing outside in the porch earlier in the evening; but, oh, how differently it had sounded then!

Then hope, joy, love had vibrated in every tone; now her voice was like that of one who e hope had fled.

"Ruth," he cried, hoarsely, as he came to her side, but without touching her, for he was terribly conscious of the great gulf that now yawned between them, "I want you to go to rest—I want you to go to bed and try to sleep. I am going to remain here for a while longer. Then I shall return to the hotel, but I will be near you again for a few moments in the

At these words, "for a few moments," she clutched his face with her despairing eyes. Then once more that hopeless cry broke from her, "Basil! Basil!" and, tottering forward, she fell, a lifeless weight, into his arms.

A great sob burst from his own lips as he gathered her passionately to his breast.

"Great Heaven! I never can bear it!" he said.

Then, lifting her slight form, he bore her upstairs and laid her upon her bed.

"It is better so, perhaps," he muttered, as he went below again to summon Mrs. Barstow, who was busy in the kitchen with some last duties.

"Mrs. Plympton has been taken suddenly ill," he told her. "Will you go up to her room and care for her?"

"What is it?" the woman questioned, as she gazed wonderingly into his white, set face.

"Mrs. Barstow, there will be no wedding to-morrow," he informed her, thinking it best that the truth be known at once.

"Mr. Ralph Plympton did not die, as was reported. He has returned—he has been here to-night."

"Oh, heavens!" cried the woman, aghast.

"While you are attending to Mrs. Plympton," Basil continued, "I will remove all decorations and put everything back in its accustomed place. As soon as she is better, just come to the head of the stairs and tell me; then I will go."

He turned abruptly away, and at once began the work of removing every evidence of what was to have occurred on the morrow, so that Ruth need not be mocked in her grief in the morning by the sight of what had been such a source of delight to her that day.

Before he had finished, Mrs. Barstow whispered from above that Ruth had revived, and she had got her into bed.

Basil merely nodded to show that he heard, then finished his work, and, when the last plant had been conveyed outside into the porch, softly shut the door, and felt as if he had closed the door of a tomb upon all that he loved.

He walked directly to the house of the flax, where he informed that Mrs. Plympton had been taken suddenly ill, and there would be no wedding; consequently he wished him to take away everything that belonged to him at as early an hour as possible in the morning.

Then he repaired to his hotel, where he passed the remainder of the night in agonies, and when morning dawned he looked as if twenty years had passed over him.

He started back in astonishment when he glanced in the glass and saw his sunken, haggard face, hardly recognizing himself.

Later he refreshed himself with a bath, and clean linen, and then went to bid the woman he loved a final farewell.

He found her waiting for him, and looking pathetically pale and hollow-eyed, but with a patient expression on her face that well-nigh unmanned him.

"Dear," he said, as he led her into the little parlour and shut the door, while he gathered both her hands in his, "I have

to catch the next express, so I have only a few moments to spare. You know that I *must* go—that a relentless fate drives me from you, or I never *could* go. But”——

He was forced to pause a moment to crush back the bitter pain that almost seemed to rend his heart asunder.

“But if you ever need me, Ruth,” he went on, brokenly, “you know the address. Never—never hesitate an instant if you want me for *anything*. Now, good-bye, dear. I must go; I am not strong enough to stay another moment.”

He raised her icy hands and crushed them against his burning lips. She was another man’s wife, and, even in his passionate yearning for one last caress from her, he would not overstep in the least degree what he regarded as the bounds of honour.

“God bless and keep you *always*,” he whispered, as he gently released his clasp. Then he was gone, and Ruth was alone.

She continued to sit where he left her, a bewildered expression on her fair face, holding her clasped hands, which were still throbbing from the pressure of Basil’s lips, pressed close against her breast.

Mrs. Barstow found her thus, when, a little later, she came with a steaming cup of tea, which she insisted upon her drinking, “every drop.”

Then she tried to coax her to eat “just a morsel,” but Ruth put the dainty lunch away from her with a gesture of aversion.

“Oh, I cannot eat; there is something that chokes me *here*,” she said, pulling nervously at the neck of her dress. “I must have air—air!” and she slipped helplessly to the floor.

That was the last she knew, for more than a week, and both Mrs. Barstow and Mary had their hands full in caring for the precious patient during those anxious days and nights of watching.

Ralph Plympton came the day after she was stricken, when he was told that it was doubtful if she would ever rally.

He saw the physician, told him confidentially something of what had occurred to cause her illness, and begged that a

trained nurse might be obtained to care for her.

But Mrs. Barstow declared that she would have no trained nurse about. She knew that she could give Ruth as good care as any one, and the observant doctor thought so too.

A girl was provided to look after the baby Browning, however, while Will proved his gratitude for the kindness which he had received from his kind friend by devoting himself most faithfully to Hope.

It was almost the 1st of October before Ruth was able to get about the house and begin to think about the duties of life once more, and as soon as she felt equal to the task, she responded to a letter that had come from Mr. Meredith during her illness, and in which he proposed to relieve her of the care of Will and his little brother, promising to see that they were both well educated and well started in life.

But she begged that she might keep them, although that need not interfere with his plans for their future. She wrote that she needed and must have plenty to occupy her time and attention, and, as she loved the children, she did not wish to part with them.

And so Hope Cottage still continued to be the home of the two orphans who had been so strangely thrown upon her care.

CHAPTER XV.

“THE MOTHER OF MY CHILD MUST BE PROPERLY ENDOWED.”

Ralph Plympton, meantime, had made a recluse of himself in his own house, except that every day he drove in a close carriage to inquire for Ruth; at least, when he was able to do so, for there were days when he was himself confined to his own bed.

Upon such occasions he would send a servant to ascertain how she was, for he was consumed with anxiety and suspense while she lay so low.

Inez Plympton had been forced to leave Hazelwood Heights in a hurry. For once Ralph had proved himself the stronger

of the two, and was obdurate in his decree, and her palatial home knew her no more.

One day, after she began to be about the house, Ruth received a note from Ralph, soliciting an interview with her if she felt equal to the effort. He remarked that he would not trespass longer than was necessary upon her time and strength, but there were some matters which he was anxious to arrange, and could not do so without first discussing them with her.

She wrote that she would receive him whenever he saw fit to call upon her. She shrank from the meeting, but, since it must come, she was anxious to have it over as soon as possible.

So, one evening early in November, he availed himself of her permission, choosing to go after dark, because he eagerly hoped for another opportunity to see Hope after she was asleep.

He greeted Ruth with an air of gentle reverence, mingled with a humility which any one who had known him previous to his illness would not have believed it possible for him to experience.

His face was still a most repulsive sight, and always would be; and yet Ruth felt,

she observed him more critically than she had been able to do during his former visit, that, at heart, he was a better man than he had ever been in the old days, when the world was like one long gila day to him.

They met almost as strangers, for, to Ruth, he had been so long dead, and her affection for him so outraged by his treatment of her, she could hardly realize that, according to the letter of the law, she was still his wife.

She saw that he was more frail, although he was far more composed than when she had seen him before; for he had lost flesh and his voice was weaker.

"Ruth," he remarked, after greeting her and entering upon the business that had brought him there, "I have come to talk with you regarding your future and Hope's. All that I have will, sooner or later, belong to you and her; and, as I am about to go abroad again—because I must live in a more equable climate, and wish to go where I am not known—I want my

affairs put in order before I leave, as it is very doubtful about my ever returning to the United States again. I wish you to understand exactly how matters stand, and to begin with, I have settled upon you an annuity which will render you independent during your life"—

"No, no! you must not do that!" interposed Ruth, flushing hotly and shrinking sensitively at the thought. "I am able to provide for my own necessities; but, of course, if you see fit to make provision for Hope's future, I have no objections to offer."

"All the same, the mother of my child must be properly endowed, and as that matter is already settled, it cannot be changed," Ralph gravely returned. "Hazelwood Heights and all else that I possess, except an income sufficient for my needs, I have transferred to Hope, to be held in trust for her until she is twenty-one years of age, or until she marries. You are to be her sole guardian, and, during her minority, are to have unlimited control of the income derived from the estate. And—and I should like it, Ruth, if you could bring your mind to live at Hazelwood, at least for a portion of every year, so that Hope may learn to love it and regard it as her home in the years to come."

"But it does not seem right for us to go there and appropriate everything, while you become an alien from your home," Ruth observed, with a troubled look; for she shrank from depriving him of his inheritance, and its many comforts, which she felt he so much needed in his present feeble state.

He started at her words and looked up eagerly, the light of a new hope gleaming for an instant in his eyes.

"Oh, Ruth, could you—could you make up your mind to go to Hazelwood to live with me? Could you so far forgive me as to consent that we should all live together under one roof there?" Ralph exclaimed, his chest heaving with a great sob, which he in vain struggled to repress. "I know I do not deserve it—I have sinned beyond all forgiveness; and yet, with your pardon as my benediction, I believe I could die content."

Wave after wave of hot colour swept over Ruth's delicate face while he was speaking, and she grew almost sick and faint with repugnance in view of his proposition, although her heart ached with sympathy for him as she realized how forlorn, how utterly friendless he was.

She was so moved that several minutes elapsed before she could reply.

At length she turned to him, a great pity shining in her eyes.

"Ralph," she said, gently, "it is best that we deal plainly with each other, once for all. I could not go to Hazelwood to live as your wife. The tie that once united us you yourself annulled—from a moral point of view—more than two years ago; and so, morally speaking, I feel that I am no more your wife to-day than the veriest stranger, although, according to the letter of the law, I am still bound to you, and I would not wilfully violate that bond in the slightest degree. I believe—yes, I know that I can forgive in so far as not to cherish a spirit of bitterness or malice towards you; for I wish to cultivate that charity which God enjoined upon us all. But what you have asked I could not do. Oh, not because of *that*, Ralph, I assure you," she hastily interposed, in a voice of pain, as she looked up, caught his eye, and he sensitively covered his scarred face from her sight. "Pray do not think for a moment," she went on, tremulously, "that *any* misfortune of a physical nature could influence me; for if n thing had ever occurred to mar the confidence and affection which we once believed existed between us—if there had never been anything to destroy my faith in the *real* man that I once believed you to be, no misfortune, however terrible, could have caused me to swerve from my allegiance."

Ralph bowed his head and groaned aloud as he realized how he, and he alone, had ruined his life. This gentle, high-minded woman, whom he had so wronged, now seemed like an angel of light to him—as far above him as the stars—and yet in his soul he knew that, in spite of the great gulf that separated them, he was nearer to her than he had ever been before.

When his life had hung quivering between time and eternity, and that loathsome disease had lost its grip upon him, it seemed as if his nature also had undergone some transformation; for later, when he came to himself, sin and sinful pleasure appeared to have lost all their former power over him, and he was imbued with an absorbing desire to atone for the past, as far as was possible, and live to some purpose during the remainder of his life.

"Forgive me if I have pained you," said Ruth, sorrowfully, and cut to the heart by his suffering. "I did not mean to wound or reproach you, only to prove to you how utterly impossible it is that we can ever resume our former relations to each other. Thus you will understand why I shrink from having you leave your home and all its comforts because of a desire to expiate the past, and I should be very unhappy to go to Hazelwood under such conditions. I realize that Hope is your child as well as mine, and that, naturally, you cherish some affection for her, and feel a desire to watch her growth and development; so, if you will remain at Hazelwood, I will never deny you the privilege of seeing her whenever you wish. But let us live here our simple life, as we have done during the last two years, though I will not refuse to accept for Hope whatever you may choose to do for her; for myself, I should prefer to carry on my business as heretofore."

"No, Ruth, I cannot consent to any such arrangement," Ralph returned, in a tone of decision. "The mother of the heiress of Hazelwood Heights must live in a becoming manner. It was presuming in me to ask you to go to reside there with me, and I beg your pardon; but it is my wish that Hope should be reared in the home that is to be hers."

"Very well, Ralph, I will not wound you more than I am obliged to," Ruth kindly replied. "I will waive my own preference in the matter, and allow you to arrange our future as you choose."

"Thank you," he gratefully responded; "then I shall carry out my first plan. I cannot remain here to live by myself in that great house; that is out of the question; such an existence would be in-

tolerable. I shall go abroad again immediately, and my lawyer has instructions to honour your wishes in every particular. Now," he added, rising, though his lips quivered, and his voice was husky with emotion, "I believe that is all. I shall leave for New York to-morrow, and sail for Europe on Saturday. I hope, Ruth, that you will find it convenient to go at once to Hazelwood, and that you will avail yourself of every comfort; it is your right—your due. You will find everything in good order at home. I have made some changes in the stables, and added a few conveniences to the house; but if there is anything else you would like done, you are free to act your own pleasure in all things. Is—I suppose Hope is in bed?" he remarked, hesitatingly, a tender tremulousness in his tones.

"Yes, she has been asleep for more than two hours," Ruth replied; adding, while tears involuntarily started to her eyes, "Would you like to see her? If so, go up to her room—you know the way and stay as long as you like."

"Thank you; it would comfort me a little if I might," Ralph responded, turning towards the door.

Then he stopped and touched, with a trembling hand, a photograph of Ruth that stood on the mantelshelf near him. It was one that had been taken recently, and was a beautiful picture.

"May I have this?" he asked, in a scarcely audible voice.

"Yes, if you wish it," she answered, two glittering drops rolling down her cheeks, in spite of her efforts to keep them back, for she pitied him from the depths of her tender heart.

He clutched at it eagerly and slipped it into an inner pocket, then turned once more to go.

"Good-bye, Ruth," he faltered, looking back as he reached the door. "God bless you, and keep you in health and—happiness."

Then he went out, quietly shutting the door after him, and presently she heard him going softly upstairs.

Utterly overcome by the harrowing interview and her sympathy for him, Ruth bowed her face upon the arm of the sofa,

and sobbed as she had not done once since those utterly desolate days just after his desertion of her. She did not love him; she was not grieving because of her shattered girlish hopes, for she had long realized that she had never really loved him, and that she had made a grave mistake when she had allowed him to persuade her into such a hasty marriage.

But she did grieve for his desolate condition, and because he had, by his own folly and recklessness, brought such judgment upon himself and forever barred himself out of all domestic happiness.

She felt it all the more because of his present patient submission to the inevitable, and the fact that he seemed to recognize the justness of his fate.

Ralph, meantime, proceeded to the room above, and remained a long while, sitting by the bedside of his sleeping child. For half an hour, at least, he sat there, and feasted his hungry heart upon her beauty, making no sound, a though two or three times he stooped to kiss the pretty dimpled hand that lay upon the counterpane, while his chest heaved with a mighty sob, which he resolutely suppressed, lest he should awaken her.

"Oh," he breathed once, as he bent over her, drinking in her innocent loveliness, "I have put myself out of Paradise! My God! why was I so weak—so utterly reckless of what I was sacrificing!"

At length he arose and stole noiselessly from the room.

In the hall he paused for a few moments to remove the wrappings from some packages which he had taken from his pockets, though his hands shook so that it was with difficulty he completed his work; then, returning to Hope's side, he deposited several beautiful and costly toys on the bed beside her, where her eyes

had fallen upon them when she awoke in the morning.

Once more he stooped, and this time kissed the flushed cheek that was nearest him; then, with one long, last look—because he believed it would be the last—he crept furtively out of the room and down the stairs.

He paused for another moment before the parlour door, his face convulsed with

pain over the thought of leaving for ever the woman whom, having lost, he now appreciated and worshipped with an idolatrous affection; then lifting his hat with an air of reverence, his lips moving as if in a last benediction upon her, he turned and went out into the cold November night—its chill dreariness impressing him as the symbol of his own life—and back to the splendour of his lonely home, which he was so soon to leave for ever.

The next morning he left Albany for New York, where he secured passage in the *Gallia*, which was advertised to sail the following Saturday.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ADVENTURE AND A WONDERFUL DISCOVERY.

The evening after Ralph Plympton's departure, the coachman from Hazelwood Heights called at Hope Cottage, and delivered the keys of the stately mansion to Ruth.

"Have you any orders, ma'am?" the man inquired, touching his hat respectfully to her.

"Not to-night," she replied, after considering a moment; "but you may drive round again to-morrow morning, and then, I think, I shall have some directions for you. At any rate, I may wish to ride over to Hazelwood and look about the place."

Later she had a long talk with Mrs. Barstow, the result of which was that the honest woman was permanently engaged to act as matron at the cottage, which was to be converted into a home for Will Browning and his brother, and possibly for some other boys as destitute as they whom Ruth might see fit to rear and educate for an honourable future.

The Monday following, having engaged a staff of efficient servants, she, with Hope and Mary, moved to Hazelwood Heights to take up her abode there as mistress, where once she had served as a seamstress to the haughty Mrs. Anthony Plympton.

A week passed at Hazelwood Heights, when something very strange happened to her.

She had been somewhat lonely in that great house, with no one save little Hope and her servants, and had about made up her mind that she could not spend the winter there, unless she could have congenial companionship.

But whom should she have?

She did not know of a single person whom she could secure, for she had no friends of her own, and her cares had been such that she had made but very few acquaintances.

Her home was everything that could be desired; she had, indeed, found everything in perfect order, as Ralph had said; while many conveniences, such as electric lights, a telephone, and electric bells connecting every portion of the house and stables, had been thoughtfully put in for her comfort.

The old carriages had all been disposed of, and elegant, modern equipages substituted.

The black pair, which were exceptionally fine horses, had been retained, but all others had been sold, and a gentle, yet spirited, horse, for Ruth's especial use, had been purchased, while there was also a charming pony that had been provided expressly for little Hope.

Everything that fostered affection and thoughtfulness could suggest had been done to make the place homelike and attractive, and yet Ruth was not happy in it; for, aside from her own loneliness, she was continually thinking of the broken-hearted alien and wanderer, feeling that she was usurping the comforts he needed; even though Mr. Silsby had assured her that the income he had reserved for himself was ample for all his wants.

It was a dreary, stormy evening, and she was sitting alone in the great library, thinking of these things.

Somehow, she could not make up her mind to retire, although every one else had long since gone to bed, and the faint and sleet, beating against the windows, made her shiver with a strange dread and a deeper sense of loneliness than she had yet experienced.

Her only companion in the lower portion of the house was the dog Rex, who

was asleep in the dining-room across the hall.

She had also been reading again that strange history which her mother had written out, regarding her connection with the Rothwicks of Derbyshire, and wondering what would eventually become of the great estate that Sir Neil Rothwick had left, with no heir to claim it.

The peculiar key, with its rude ornamentation of the thistle and olive leaves, lay on the table beside her, and the Rothwick cane, which for the hundredth time she had examined with a kind of morbid curiosity, stood by her, the horse's head hooked upon the arm of her chair.

The clock on the mantelshelf had just struck the half-hour after eleven; the fire in the grate had almost burned out; and she had just made up her mind—that it was time she also was in bed, when a slight, every-sight-sound, in the parlor adjoining the library caused her to start and creep to creep over her.

She listened a moment, holding her breath—but as the sound was not repeated, she smiled at her fears, and, rising from her chair, paused a moment to lighten out her writing materials, that nothing might be left in order.

Then, done, she turned and found herself confronted by a burly, villainous-looking person, whose face, as he caught sight of her, instantly relaxed into a hideous grin of triumph.

"Ah! my little lady!" he said, with a chuckle of intense satisfaction, "so we meet again! I did not suppose, when I came here to night, that I was going to find an old acquaintance. Don't you make any noise, though, unless you want a hole bored through you," he added, touching his hip pocket significantly.

Ruth was speechless from fright and amazement; but she instantly recognized the repulsive intruder the man who had insulted her on board the steamer upon her arrival in New York, more than five years back.

He was coarser and even more repulsive in appearance than he had been at that time, while the malicious leer that distorted his face, in view of this unex-

pected opportunity to revenge an old grievance, appalled Ruth beyond expression.

"You know me, I see, miss," he went on, reading the recognition that gleamed in her eyes; "but you don't look much like the poverty-stricken girl who lost her ticket on the *City of Rome* that morning in New York. What has become of that handsome swell, I wonder? There's one thing sure, and that is, he can't put in an appearance just at the right time to-night to knock a fellow down for paying a pretty woman a compliment. Now, my lady," he went on, assuming a resolute air, "I don't know whether you are a servant or the mistress here, but I do happen to know that there's a fine lot of silver in this house, and I'll trouble you to hand it over to me; and after that," he concluded, with another malicious grin, "we'll have a little social chat together."

Ruth shivered from head to foot at his look and tone, but she made no reply, although she had been thinking rapidly all the time he was speaking.

On the opposite side of the room there was an electric button, which, if she could but reach and press, would ring a bell in the stable that would soon bring both the coachman and footster to her aid. But in order to get to it she must pass that dreadful man.

"Come!" he said, reaching out one hand and laying it on her arm. "I guess I'll first take the keys to the safe and see if I can't find some money in it."

"Don't touch me!" cried Ruth, moving back a step, all her spirit aroused by his act.

"Ha, ha!" he laughed, mockingly; "you look very pretty putting on those queenly airs. But they don't count for anything with me. You've got to do as I tell you, and you'd better be quick about it, or I shall have to make you. Come, come!—d'ye hear?" and he grasped her arm again.

Ruth's heart bounded into her throat as his cruel fingers closed over her tender flesh; then a glad light suddenly leaped into her eyes.

"Rex! Rex!" she managed to call in

a sharp, imperative tone before the man clapped his hand over her mouth; and the next instant she heard a scrambling on the polished floor of the dining-room, then a couple of bounds across the hall, and the faithful dog appeared upon the scene.

Another bound and he was upon the villain, who, taken thus unawares, released his hold upon Ruth, fully realizing that he would need all his strength and wit to defend himself against the infuriated dog.

Rex had leaped upon his right shoulder, where he hung with grim determination, although the man's heavy coat prevented his sharp teeth from entering his flesh.

He reached for his hip pocket, and whipped out a revolver, cocking it in the act.

"Oh!" breathed Ruth, with a thrill of despair, as she realized his intention, and, on the impulse of the perilous moment, seizing the stout Rothwick cane from her chair, she raised it high and brought it down with all her strength upon his arm.

The revolver dropped from his grasp, exploding as it struck the floor, but fortunately, doing no damage, although the beautifully-carved head of the cane was broken from its stock and went flying to the farther end of the room; while the wretch, uttering a howl of rage and pain, caught his limp and helpless arm in his left hand, every atom of colour fading from his face.

Ruth had broken it with the frenzied blow she had dealt him.

With the stem of the cane still in her hands, but even in that supreme moment experiencing a feeling of deep regret that the Rothwick heirloom was destroyed, she darted to the electric button and pressed it hard several times in quick succession.

"Call the beast off, can't you?" cried the burglar, who was still struggling with the dog. "He'll kill me next!"

"Rex! Rex!" said Ruth, reprovingly; "don't hurt him. Take good care of him, sir; but don't hurt him."

The intelligent animal instantly relaxed the pressure of his teeth, although he did not release his hold of the man, and

growled menacingly with every effort he made to free himself.

Seeing that he would not harm him, Ruth now darted to a window, for she had caught the sound of footsteps upon the verandah, and threw it open.

"Tom! Asa!" she cried, as she saw the two men, "there is a robber here, though Rex has him safe for the moment. Tom, you come in to keep guard, while Asa goes back to the stable for a rope to bind him."

The coachman entered through the open window, while his companion flew back to the stable to obey his mistress's orders, and in less than fifteen minutes the bold intruder was bound hand and foot, and locked in one of the box stalls, with Tom as keeper, to await daylight, when he was to be given over to the officers of the law.

Of course the whole household—all save Hope—had been roused by that time, and it was more than an hour before quiet was restored and the servants could be persuaded to go back to bed. Although Ruth apprehended no further disturbance that night, she retained Asa in the house, as a watcher with Rex, for the sake of the frightened maids; then, gathering up her Rothwick relics, she also went upstairs to her room, and locked the door for the first time since coming to Hazelwood Heights.

Little Hope slept in the apartment adjoining hers, and Mary, the nurse, in the one beyond; so, with all the doors fastened, Ruth felt as safe as if she were in a fortress.

But she was so excited she could not sleep. Every pulse in her body was still thrilling from the terrible ordeal through which she had passed, and she threw herself weakly into a great Turkish rocking-chair to rest and try to quiet her nerves.

She sat there more than an hour, living over the dreadful scene that had occurred below, and in connection with it that other incident that had happened on the steamer, while she told herself that she never could remain at Hazelwood Heights without more protection and companionship.

It was a large house, somewhat remote

from neighbours, and she realized that it was absolutely necessary that she should have some responsible man in the house both day and night.

"I will drive to town to-morrow morning and consult Mr. Silsby regarding the matter," she murmured, thoughtfully. "Possibly he may know of some reliable man and his wife who would be glad of just such a home."

Having settled this important point in her mind, she arose and exchanged her dress for a loose wrapper, for she could not think of going to bed, and resolved to get a book and try to while away the hours by reading until morning.

As she stood before her dressing-case, carelessly knotting the heavy cords of her dress about her waist, her eyes fell upon the Rothwick key and the broken cane, which she had laid there on coming upstairs.

"I am very sorry that I broke it," she remarked, as she lifted the handsomely-carved head to examine the break, "but possibly it can be mended."

She took up the stem to see if the two pieces could be neatly fitted together, when she was surprised to observe that it was hollow, and that something—it looked like a piece of letter paper—had been rolled and inserted within the stem.

"How very strange!" she cried, an eager light sweeping over her face.

With trembling fingers and a rapidly beating heart she drew forth the roll, which had become yellow with time, and had been carefully shaped just to fit its place of concealment.

Spreading it out, she found that there were two papers.

On the first there had been drawn a plan, as if for some architectural purpose. It represented an arched panel set in a wall.

In the centre there was an elaborate design composed of thistles and olive leaves, bound together with a ribbon, tied in a bow-knot, and in the centre of this there was a single star, with what looked to be a slot cut in it.

At the bottom of the panel there were some figures—11, 9, 4.

"What can be the meaning of this strange drawing?" Ruth remarked, in a tone of perplexity. "It must be something important, or it never would have been so cunningly concealed in this wonderful case, and these figures must, of course, have some significance."

She studied it a few moments longer, then, laying it carefully aside, took up the other to examine it.

"Why, wonder of wonders!" she cried, with a violent start, her whole face flushing a vivid crimson, "can it be possible?"

The paper that had caused these exclamations was nothing less than the record of a marriage, duly signed and witnessed, and the names of the contracting parties were Amos Rothwick, Baronet, and Elizabeth Allenwood!

Ruth sank upon the nearest chair, panting and weak from the shock which this remarkable revelation had given her.

"Oh, I can hardly credit the evidence of my own senses!" she exclaimed, in astonishment. "And so that mystery is solved at last! And—and," she continued, as she clasped the paper to her breast, her face illumined with a sudden exultant conviction, "who knows but that I may prove to be the nearest of kin to the late Sir Neil Rothwick, the heir to his unclaimed estate? Somehow, I have had a belief that I belonged legitimately to the race from which my mother sprang. My great-grandmother was, then, really married to Sir Amos, but, for some reason, it is evident he dared not acknowledge the fact, and so committed a crime by concealing it and publicly marrying that other woman. But—what is this?" she added, as the paper slipped from one hand, and instantly rolled together, while her eye caught sight of some writing on the back which she had not before observed.

Spreading it out again, she read, with kindling eyes and leaping pulses, the following statement:

Born April 5th, 1802, Robert Allenwood Rothwick, only son of Amos Rothwick, and rightful heir to his title and estate.

AMOS ROTHWICK, Bart.
Rothwick Castle, Sept. 2, 1808.

"Well, I have heard of 'a story in a nutshell,' but such a romance as this in a *stick of wood* beats anything I ever dreamed of before!" gasped Ruth, almost breathless, as she gazed with wonder-wide eyes upon the above extraordinary disclosure.

Here was proof positive that Ruth's grandfather, Robert Allenwood, had been the lawful son and only heir of that wicked old baronet who was supposed to have wronged the daughter of one of his own tenants so many years ago.

It was certainly very strange that, since he had been legally wedded, he should have *dared* to conceal the fact, and boldly taken another to reign as mistress of his castle.

Why, since he *had* so dared, had he taken pains to preserve the proof of his crime, and also record the birth of his child, and put the evidence of it into the hands of the woman whom he had wronged?

Ah, but there had been a terrible quarrel spoken of in that little book!

Doubtless Lady Rothwick had carried things with such a high hand that she had incurred her husband's hatred; and he, to carry out the legend embodied in the Rothwick coat of arms—"A wrong is never forgiven until it is avenged"—had taken this way to be revenged upon and humiliate her.

Ah! for poor Elizabeth Allenwood that that letter had been lost and her vindication come so late!

CHAPTER XVII.

RUTH SAILS FOR ENGLAND TO CLAIM HER HERITAGE.

So that night of horrors at Hazelwood Hights resulted in good, after all; for it proved that Robert Allenwood—Ruth's grandfather—had been the legitimate son and only heir of Sir Amos Rothwick, and that Neil Rothwick—so called—the son of the supposed Lady Rothwick, had been a usurper.

It also revealed some other mysterious things, but of these more anon.

Ruth's fair face was an interesting study as she reasoned out the line of

succession from Sir Amos down, and^b became convinced that she was a direct and legal descendant of the proud, though none too upright, old baronet.

Yes, without doubt, Robert Allenwood Rothwick should have inherited his father's title and estates; these estates in turn should have descended to her mother, Elizabeth Allenwood Reynolds, and so come down to herself, who was her only living child.

Recalling the statement which she had so recently read, regarding the lapsing of the Rothwick estates to the Crown for the want of an heir, she felt assured that she might rightfully lay claim to them as the nearest of kin.

"Sir Amos must have been fond of that girl—my great-grandmother—and her child, to have taken so much pains to provide for them," Ruth mused, as she carefully put away the papers which she had taken from the cane; "and yet, possibly, he was of such a vindictive nature that he cared more to be revenged upon the haughty mistress of Rothwick Castle than for the disgraceful exposure that would follow the presentation of these papers—especially as, knowing that he was dying, it could not affect him personally. It was surely very cunning of him to think of concealing these proofs in the cane. But there must have been something more embodied in his plot, or he would never have sent this key, with the cane, to Elizabeth Allenwood. Ah! how much that lost letter of explanation—for doubtless it was such—would have revealed! How I wish it might be found! But"—taking up the cane again and peering curiously into it—"there may be something else here which will give me a clue."

And sure enough, she could just discern another white paper which had been tucked farther down into the cavity.

She could not reach it with her fingers, but taking a pair of scissors from her work-basket, she managed to draw forth a tiny package wrapped in soft tissue paper.

Unfolding this, she found another small and very odd-shaped key.

It was a thin piece of steel, formed like

a saw, with three or four small teeth on the small end.

On the opposite end there had been rudely cut a star similar to the one which she had observed on the bow-knot in the design of the panel.

"Well, the mystery deepens," she murmured; "and, of course, this key must be valuable, or it never would have been so carefully secreted. What will it unlock, I wonder? Shall I ever know? Now I should like to discover if this strange treasure-vault contains anything more of interest," she concluded, again turning her attention to the broken staff.

She thought she could detect the gleam of more paper.

She turned it bottom end up and shook it, but nothing came out.

She tapped it sharply several times upon the floor, and, lo! one tiny package after another came tumbling out—each wrapped in tissue paper, as the key had been.

Picking up one of these, she opened it, when a cry of astonishment broke from her, for in her hand there lay a large and glittering diamond of purest water.

Another and another of those mysterious rolls was examined, with the same result, until Ruth was almost paralyzed by the sight of the treasure that had so strangely come into her possession.

She knew that a large sum was represented by the little pile of precious gems that lay before her.

They were not all diamonds; there were pearls and rubies, sapphires and emeralds, the whole lower half of the cane having been closely packed with the valuable stones, which had doubtless been wrapped separately in tissue paper to prevent their rattling in the cane.

She could scarcely realize the evidence of her own senses. Her discovery seemed more like some extravagant dream—some vision of the imagination or a story from the "Arabian Nights."

But there was the tangible proof before her to assure her that she had been the victim of no hallucination, while no one could dispute the fact that what she had discovered rightfully belonged to her, or

that her papers proved her to be a direct descendant of Sir Amos Rothwick, of Rothwick Castle.

In connection with these revelations, her mind reverted to that strange incident which had occurred on the *Germanic*, during her voyage across the Atlantic three years previous.

She vividly recalled her meeting with the queer old gentleman and his peculiar-looking servant, with the snow white hair, intensely black eyes, and pale olive complexion.

She remembered how startled both had appeared to be on beholding her—how they had spoken of some picture which she strongly resembled, and how the old gentleman had, in his excitement, dropped his cane, the head of which bore the Rothwick coat of arms.

Yes, the more she thought the matter over, the more firmly convinced she became that she had a lawful claim upon the Rothwick estate, which was said to have no heir.

She became so absorbed in considering all these wonderful things that she forgot the dreadful experience of the earlier hours of the night.

Her eyes gleamed like stars, her cheeks were crimson from excitement, and her heart throbbed with a suddenly awakened ambition and new hopes.

"If it *should* be true—if I could *prove* it true, I should become possessed of great wealth of my own. And Hope! oh, *what* a future there would be for Hope!" she breathed, with sudden exultation. "Ah," she continued, a thrill of pride in her voice, "I *felt* it that day when Mr. Anthony Plympton so arrogantly repudiated us; something seemed to tell me that some time we should be vindicated; but I never dreamed of *such* a vindication as this!"

Then she began to grow timid, and to tremble in view of the great responsibilities that would devolve upon her if the Rothwick estates should come into her possession.

"I am so alone in the world," she sighed, with a quiver of her sweet lips as she thought of Basil, and what a tower of strength he would have been to her,

if she could have leaned upon him at this time.

She longed to consult him and ask his advice upon what course would be best for her to pursue; but she was so strictly conscientious she would not harbour for a moment the thought of appealing to him.

She was still Ralph Plympton's wife, and she would be rigidly loyal to the letter of the law, even though she could not be so in spirit.

"No," she said, sadly, as she gathered up her precious stones and locked them away with her papers and queer old keys in a strong box, "we cannot bear to meet again at present. I will go to Mr. Silsby in the morning, tell him the whole story, and ask him to advise me."

She also took good care of the Rothwick cane, with its finely-carved but severed head; for she knew she would need it to prove her statements, when, later on, she related her wonderful story to the English authorities.

Then, wearied out with the strange and exciting experiences of the night, she threw herself upon her bed—just as the hall clock struck four—and was soon sleeping soundly and restfully.

As early as possible the next morning an officer was summoned to take the midnight marauder into custody, whereupon it was discovered that he was an old offender who had long been wanted to answer for several other burglaries.

Later he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to ten years' hard labour in the Auburn State Prison.

Ruth went to Mr. Silsby with her strange story, together with her proofs and the clipping from the New York paper relating to the vain search for an heir to the Rothwick estates, and the probability of their lapsing to the English Crown.

The lawyer immediately became greatly excited over the wonderful romance.

"Why, Mrs. Plympton," he cried, "you are destined to become celebrated! There cannot be the slightest doubt that you are the sole heir to this vast property, and you must attend to the matter at once."

"But how? What must I do?" questioned Ruth, in perplexity. "I am very ignorant of the laws of my own country, to say nothing about those of England."

"You will, of course, be obliged to go to England and institute a claim; you ought not to delay the matter a single day."

"But how can I?" Ruth anxiously inquired. "I know no one in England, and I might be unwise in my choice of a solicitor. Oh, Mr. Silsby, I am half inclined to do nothing at all about it—the thought of so much care and responsibility frightens me; and yet I wish, above everything else, to establish the fact that my grandfather was nobly born, and my mother a descendant of well-bred people."

"Nonsense, child; don't be frightened at shadows!" the lawyer returned, with playful sternness. "I am myself mightily interested in this very romantic affair, and would like to see how it will end. With your permission," he added, "I will cable to the solicitors who are said to have charge of the estate, and inquire how much time remains before the matter must be settled."

"Oh, will you?" eagerly questioned Ruth. "I shall be very glad to leave it all in your hands; you may do just what you would do for yourself, if you were in my place."

"Thank you," said the gratified lawyer. "Then I will cable at once, and shall doubtless be able to return to you to-morrow with some news. Meantime," he continued, gravely, "you must have some one out at Hazelwood to protect you against future experiences like that of last night, and I think I know just the right parties—a gentleman and his wife."

"Oh, I am very glad," said Ruth, with a sigh of relief. "Who are they?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Winslow. They are very nice people, who have recently lost everything they possessed," Mr. Silsby explained. "They have not even a roof to shelter them, and it would be an act of kindness to them, as well as a protection to yourself, to allow them to come to you for a while."

"Winslow!" Ruth repeated, reflectively.

"Yes. Mr. Winslow's nerves are con-

siderably upset over his misfortune, and he needs rest and quiet; he would, however, be a protection in the house, while his wife is a very entertaining woman, and I am sure would be companionable to you."

"Where are they from?" Ruth quired, with rising colour.

"They are New York people, but, just now, they are here in Albany, and stopping at a third-rate lodging-house."

"Is the gentleman's name William Winslow?" Ruth asked.

"Yes. Do you know him?" queried Mr. Silsby, in surprise.

"I used to know both Mr. Winslow and his wife," his companion gravely returned. Then, after thinking a moment, she added, "Yes, Mr. Silsby, if you think they would like to come to Hazelwood Heights, I shall be glad to have them do so, and will do all I can to make them feel at home. I am compelled to go now, but I shall be obliged to you if you will see them and tell them to come out to see me this afternoon."

The lawyer promised, and Ruth went home in a very peculiar frame of mind, for she was about to return the favour (?) which her mother's friend (?) had once done her, and she meant to render the service in just the same spirit that her dear mother would have wished her to do.

Still, she could not help smiling to herself as she remembered how she, a poor, rustic, country girl, had been received by the Winslows upon her arrival in New York, five years previous; and how, the very next day, she had been hurried off into Mrs. Anthony Plympton's service, to rely upon her own exertions, with never an inquiry afterwards regarding her welfare.

About three o'clock that afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Winslow arrived at Hazelwood Heights, and were ushered into the elegant drawing-room by a smartly-dressed servant.

Presently Ruth came tripping down to them, all smiles and graciousness; but before she could greet her guests Mrs. Winslow recognized her, and exclaimed, in great surprise:

"Why, Ruth Reynolds! are you still here?"

"Yes, Mrs. Winslow, I am still here," Ruth laughingly replied, but blushing to its "although"——

Well, you must have proved very efficient to have remained here all these years," the woman interposed, before she could explain the situation, "and doubtless Mrs. Ralph Plympton was glad to find some one thoroughly familiar with the ways of the house when she came into the property."

Ruth laughed out musically again, but feeling slightly embarrassed by her visitor's curiosity.

"Dear Mrs. Winslow, I am Mrs. Ralph Plympton," she said, with charming frankness, but without the slightest assumption of vanity in the confession.

"You—are—Mrs. Ralph Plympton?" gasped her guest, losing all her colour, and almost her breath, at this unlooked-for revelation.

"Yes."

"And the mistress of *all this*!" continued the woman, glancing round the beautiful room with appreciative eyes.

"Yes; but I was almost inclined to think, last night, that it was my misfortune rather than my privilege," the pretty hostess returned, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, and anxious to reassure the couple, who were evidently beginning to feel very uncomfortable over the situation. "I never was more frightened in my life, and made up my mind that I could not remain here another night without ample protection. I feel that I am very fortunate in having you come to me—you are not like strangers, for you were papa's and mamma's friends for so long, you know," she concluded, cordially.

"Mrs. Plympton, the obligation is all on our side," Mr. Winslow here remarked, with an embarrassed air.

"Pray do not speak in that way," said Ruth, kindly; adding, hastily, "And now, if you will come up-stairs, I will show you your rooms, and then I want you to see my precious little girl. Do you know, Mrs. Winslow, I think she looks very much like dear unamma."

Could anything have been sweeter or more charming than this greeting from the girl to whom they had been so ungracious five years previous?

As a matter of fact, they had not been really unkind to her; but she had been made to feel that she was something of a burden to them, and the sooner they could get her off their hands the better they would be pleased.

Mr. Winslow looked very uncomfortable, but his wife was equal to the occasion.

She was not a bad woman at heart, but the sudden prosperity that had served to launch her for a while upon the topmost wave of society had been rather too much for her not too well-balanced mind, and so she had grown proud and selfish.

But she redeemed herself now, however, for, going straight up to Ruth, she put her arms round her and kissed her, tears of honest regret starting to her eyes.

"Ruth Reynolds, you are a true-hearted Christian," she said, tremulously—"the worthy daughter of a worthy mother."

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Winslow. You could not have paid me a greater compliment, for mamma *was* a dear, good woman. Now come, please; I want you to get settled, for I am impatient to show you my little treasure."

She slipped her arm round the woman's waist and led her upstairs to a charming suite of rooms, where, after assuring herself that nothing had been neglected that would contribute to their comfort, she left them, remarking, with a confiding smile and nod, as she went out:

"It is such a relief to have you here!"

It was, indeed, a great relief to Ruth to have such an addition to her family.

She felt almost as safe as if she were now protected by a standing army, for Mr. Winslow, although nervous and greatly depressed at times over his losses and the fact that he was out of business, was a strong man, and one of commanding presence, while both he and his wife were cultured, entertaining, and very companionable.

Mr. Silsby called at Hazelwood Heights the second evening after his interview

with Ruth, and informed her that a cable despatch from London stated that if the claimant to the Rothwick estates intended to press her claim, she must put in an appearance and her evidence before the 1st of January, as a near relative of the late Sir Neil Rothwick had recently presented evidence which seemed to prove a title to the property, and the matter was to be decided before the judge at the next term.

"This state of things will necessitate your going to England at once, Mrs. Plympton," the lawyer remarked, "for there may be a great deal of business to be transacted, especially if this other claimant should prove to be disagreeable and tricky; and such matters should not be hurried—every point should be carefully weighed."

Ruth sighed.

She dreaded the trial before her, particularly as she might be obliged to battle for her rights; and yet she was anxious to establish the honour of her family, and to vindicate that of poor Elizabeth Allenwood, who had gone to her grave with a stigma resting upon her fair fame.

Suddenly her face lighted as with an inspiration.

"Mr. Silsby, will *you* go with me and attend to this business?" she eagerly asked.

The lawyer looked gratified at the request, and then grew grave, as if considering the ways and means of such an arrangement.

"Well," he replied, after a moment, "my wife and I have long talked of a trip to Europe, but the consummation of our desires has seemed to be in the dim future. I am not sure, however, that this is not just the opportunity for us to improve. We could then combine business with pleasure. Yes, I think I will accept your offer, and thank you heartily for your confidence in me. I will devote myself first to your interests, then do my travelling and sight-seeing afterwards. Can you be ready to sail by a week from Wednesday?"

This question almost took Ruth's breath away; but there was no reason why she should delay, and, after some

further discussion, she finally decided that that date would suit her as well as any other.

She longed to inform Basil of her intended departure; she wanted to see him just once; she yearned inexpressibly for one look into his eyes, a parting hand-clasp and a word of farewell.

Where would be the harm? she asked herself over and over. She was going to be in New York for a day, and it would be only a friendly courtesy to tell him of her plans and allow him to wish her success and *bon voyage*.

Both had been so rigidly conscientious that neither had attempted to communicate with the other since they said farewell in the little parlour of Hope Cottage, on what was to have been their wedding-day.

Yet each knew that the love for the other was just as strong and true—that it could never abate while they lived; but right was right, and any yielding to temptation would only serve to make their cross so much the harder to bear, and detract from their own self-respect as well.

So Ruth smothered her yearning to meet Basil, and sailed without a word of explanation or farewell, although the thought of putting the ocean between them seemed almost like bidding him an eternal good-bye.

She left Hazelwood Heights in the care of the Winslows, and also instructed them to have an oversight of the little family at Hope Cottage, in whom Mr. Winslow had already become deeply interested, and had also made some useful and practical suggestions regarding the perpetuation of this home for worthy, homeless boys.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RUTH GAINS HER HERITAGE.

On their arrival in London, our little party took pleasant apartments in Lowndes-square, where they made themselves as comfortable as possible in view of their indefinite sojourn there.

Mr. Silsby made, it his first business after his arrival to seek an interview with

the solicitors who had the Rothwick property in charge, and from whom he learned, somewhat to his disgust, that the other claimant for the estates had produced evidence which seemed to prove an indisputable title to them.

Messrs. Temple and Henderson were, however, anxious to investigate all claims, so that the matter would be definitely settled, and thus they received Mr. Silsby with great courtesy, and explained to him the exact condition of affairs.

The "genealogical tree" was produced, and the line of succession traced, going back as far as Sir Roger Rothwick.

Sir Roger had had one child only, Sir Amos Rothwick, who had married a lady of excellent lineage, although her family, Wallace by name, were in very reduced circumstances.

A son, named Neil Wallace Rothwick, had been the result of this union, and he, at the age of twenty-five, had married the daughter of an English bishop.

Several children had been born to this branch of the family, but only one had lived to grow up, a daughter, who had eloped at the age of eighteen with a man whom Sir Neil had detested, whereupon the baronet had discarded her, and never afterwards allowed her to cross his threshold.

Sir Neil, after that time, had lived utterly alone in his castle, with only his steward and servants for companions, until, about a year previous, he had died, leaving no will.

As far as could be ascertained, he had never held any communication with his daughter, neither had he appeared to have the slightest interest in her fate after she incurred his displeasure.

It had been rumoured, at one time, that he had made a will—drawing it up himself—in which he had cut off this daughter and her heirs with the proverbial shilling, bequeathing all his personal property to various charitable institutions, and his estates to the Crown.

But no such will could be found after the baronet's death, although a thorough search had been instituted by his private secretary and his solicitors, Messrs. Temple and Henderson.

Consequently the whole property had come very near lapsing to the Crown, when there suddenly appeared an heir-apparent, who claimed to be the only child of the discarded daughter, and the grandchild of the late Sir Neil.

This was the state of things as explained to Mr. Silsby during his first interview with Messrs. Temple and Henderson; but those gentlemen were completely staggered when he submitted to them the evidence in his possession to prove Ruth's title to the Rothwick estates.

They were obliged to admit that it was conclusive. There could be no doubt that the certificate of marriage was genuine, or that Sir Amos, himself, had recorded the birth of his son on the back of it, for the handwriting was at once recognized as his, when compared with some other documents that had been preserved; while the Rothwick cane and the two keys, ornamented with the family coat-of-arms, were strong additional proofs.

The design of the panel, which had also been found in the hollow cane, was said to be an exact copy or reproduction of the numerous panels with which the library at Rothwick Castle was adorned; although the figures at the bottom of the drawing caused the solicitors no little perplexity. The jewels, they conceded, must have been concealed with the proofs, to enable the real wife to push her claim, in case the supposed Lady Rothwick should attempt to contest it, as doubtless she would have done, for the sake of her son and her own reputation.

At first, it seemed as if a long time of litigation was likely to follow Ruth's unexpected appearance upon the scene, for, according to Messrs. Temple and Henderson's representation, the other claimant was exceedingly obstinate, utterly refusing to recognize her proofs, pronouncing them clever forgeries, and insisted upon carrying the matter into court.

It was finally agreed, by both parties, to informally submit all facts and proofs to a certain distinguished Queen's Counsel, as referee, and abide by his decision.

The morning of the all-important day at length arrived, and Ruth, feeling exceedingly nervous, in view of the unavoidable meeting with her opponent, repaired to the appointed place, in company with Mr. and Mrs. Silsby.

The other parties had arrived before them, and thus, when our gentle heroine entered the room, it was to be confronted, as possibly has already been surmised, by Mrs. Anthony Plympton, her former rival and bitter enemy, who had submitted documents to prove that she was the granddaughter of Sir Neil Rothwick, and so, perforce, the sole heir of the Rothwick estates.

Of course, both had known, ever since Mr. Silsby's first interview with Messrs. Temple and Henderson, that for the third time they were rivals in a matter of vital interest; but their meeting was none the less disagreeable on that account.

Inez Plympton's face grew almost purple with impotent rage as the fair, sweet woman whom she hated came into her presence.

"Oh, you miserable little marplot!" she cried, in a terrible passion, and wholly unmindful of the spectacle she was making of herself. "Heavens! Mr. Temple," she added, turning to one of the solicitors, "this woman has thwarted me for years at every turn!"

"Ahem! If madam will calm herself, we shall be able the more readily to conclude our business," suavely remarked the lawyer, although her vulgar burst of temper caused an expression of disgust to pass over his face.

At the same moment a gentleman advanced to place a chair for Ruth, and, stooping, whispered a few words in her ear.

Ruth started violently as she caught sight of his face, for she instantly recognized him as the attendant of the old gentleman whom she had seen on the *Germanic* during her first voyage across the Atlantic, and who had been so startled upon observing her strange resemblance to some picture.

He was not quite as stout as he had been at that time, but he had the same pale, olive complexion, the same intensely black eyes and snow-white hair that

made him so striking in appearance, and had so vividly impressed her on meeting him.

He was the same man, too, who has previously been introduced to the reader as Señor Castillo, and who had figured so conspicuously in Saratoga with Mrs. Anthony Plympton during the previous summer.

At that time, however, his appearance had been somewhat changed by the fact that he had dyed his hair black, in order to make himself look younger and thus more attractive; for, having been thrown out of his comfortable berth as the confidential clerk of Sir Neil Rothwick, he had determined to catch a rich American wife, if possible, and thus secure a comfortable future for himself.

He also had seemed somewhat startled as his eyes fell upon Ruth's fair face; for the same resemblance to the portrait, already referred to, which he had previously observed, now impressed him again.

But the lawyers now proceeded at once to business, and the proofs of the rival claimants to the Rothwick property were discussed in all their bearings.

But for that strange legacy—the Rothwick cane and the secrets it had concealed—Inez Plympton would have won everything; but, with the certificate proving the validity of the secret marriage of Sir Amos Rothwick to Elizabeth Allenwood, together with the record, in the baronet's own handwriting, of the birth of his son, Robert Allenwood Rothwick, the evidence that Ruth was the only lineal descendant was too potent to be contested—so the distinguished Queen's Counsel decided.

It also proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the late Sir Neil Rothwick had, all his life, been an impostor and usurper, although, as far as he was concerned, an innocent one.

And now it also came out that Señor Castillo had not only gone to America in search of a rich wife—which had really been a secondary object—but to try to trace the grandchild of Sir Neil, for Inez Plympton was *his own child*, and he felt assured that, if he could find her, and

secure her recognition as the heir of the baronet, he would henceforth shine by reflected glory, and never lack luxuries during the remainder of his life.

Yes, Señor Castillo was the man with whom Sir Neil's daughter, Gertrude Rothwick, had eloped, nearly thirty years previous.

He had taken his wife directly to Madrid—when he found that there was no hope that the baronet would relent and receive her back into his favour—where Inez, their child, was born. Thus we can now understand, more fully, the nature of the man's interview with Mrs. Anthony Plympton when he met her at the Grand Union in Saratoga. He had recognized her by her resemblance to her mother, in form and feature, although she possessed his eyes, complexion, and temperament; and we already know how he won her co-operation in his scheme.

When the disappointed woman realized that she had no claim whatever upon the Rothwick estates, she became furious, and swept swiftly from the room, before any one could detain her.

That night Señor Castillo departed for Spain, and not one of the company ever saw him again.

Since there was now no one to contest Ruth's claims, she was informed that, after complying with the requirements of the law, she would be recognized as the lawful heir to the Rothwick estates, as well as to all personal property belonging thereto.

CHAPTER XIX.

"AHA! WE HAVE FOUND THE SECRET AT LAST!"

The next thing on the programme was to pay a visit to Rothwick Castle, the keys to it having been formally surrendered to her; and, one bright morning in January, Ruth, in company with Mr. and Mrs. Silsby, and Hope, repaired to the grand old home of her forefathers, on a tour of inspection.

A sense of awe began to creep over her as the towers and turrets of the great building appeared in sight. Their driver, who was taking them over from

the nearest station, remarked, with some personal pride, that the vast estate extended "for miles and miles to the north and west, and no finer deer could be found than those that roamed the Rothwick parks."

The castle was a huge stone building, covering a wide extent of ground, something after the old Norman style of architecture, yet somewhat modernized by recent additions. It formed a stately and magnificent pile, and was wonderfully picturesque with the rich, dark-hued ivy which grew to the topmost turret of its walls.

Turning in at the lodge, which was in keeping with the style of the castle, the party swept up a long avenue, guarded on either side by beautiful beeches, and finally came out into an open space, where, on a gentle rise of ground, stood the castle.

The spacious lawn showed marks of neglect, and the whole place wore a deserted air; but otherwise the estate appeared to have been well cared for.

Several servants had been retained to look after and preserve the place from depredations, and as notice of the coming of the new heiress had been sent them by Mes-srs. Temple and Henderson, efforts had been made to give the interior of the great structure—at least some portions of it—an air of comfort and cheerfulness.

Various rooms had been thrown open and aired, and rousing fires built in the huge fireplaces.

The hall was lofty and spacious, with a great fireplace at one end, and was lined from floor to ceiling with paintings, statuary, and ancient armour. It was panelled and finished in oak, its floor polished to the last degree of brightness, while costly Turkish rugs were prodigally spread over its slippery surface.

A generous and appetizing lunch was served here, before the glowing fire, and when the party had partaken of it, there appeared a faithful old servitor—who informed them that he had been in the service of Sir Neil "for forty year or more"—to conduct them over the building.

From the moment that he presented himself Ruth observed that he kept casting curious glances upon her, and immediately her mind reverted to the picture which it was thought she resembled.

"What is it, Mr. Wickford?" she smilingly inquired. "Do I make you think of any one belonging to the family?"

"Indeed you do, lady," he replied, touching his forehead respectfully; "ye are the very image of Sir Roger Rothwick's lady—the mother of Sir Amos. Her picture hangs in the second hall; I'll show it to you when we go up."

He led her directly to the portrait as soon as they ascended the stairs, when they all were amazed at Ruth's remarkable likeness to it.

But for the ancient style of the dress and arrangement of the hair, one might almost have supposed her to have been the original of the portrait.

The broad, intelligent brow, the great, truthful blue eyes, the sweet, expressive mouth, the golden hair and delicate contour of the face were all the same.

"It is very strange, isn't it?" Ruth thoughtfully observed, as she studied the face of her great-great-grandmother, "that there should have been such a faithful reproduction five generations after this was painted?"

"It certainly is a remarkable coincidence," Mr. Silsby replied.

Space will not permit us to follow the party through the labyrinth of rooms and passages of the castle, nor to rehearse the many legends connected with this or that wing or state apartment which Wickford narrated with much gusto.

It was a most interesting tour of inspection, yet by the time they were through with it Ruth experienced a strange feeling of oppression under her increasing responsibilities, although there was also something of a sense of pride in the knowledge that she was the sole heir to this noble home of her ancestors.

After dinner, which was served in a pleasant dining-room looking out upon the extensive lawn, little Hope was sent away to bed; while Ruth and her friends repaired to the library to talk over the

varied experiences of the day, and to discuss certain plans for future action.

They had been chatting socially for an hour or more, when, with a sudden shock, Ruth's attention was attracted to the decorations of the room.

It was beautifully panelled on all sides, every other panel being the exact counterpart of the design which she had found in the old Rothwick cane.

She started to her feet, exclaiming, with some excitement:

"Mr. Silsby, I am going to try to solve the mystery of that panel. You remember the design which I showed you?"

"Yes," the gentleman replied, looking round him with eager interest; "and now I see that it must have been copied from one of the panels in this room."

"I am going to get the paper," Ruth remarked. "I wonder I have not thought of it before; but there have been so many other things to occupy us all day."

She hastened from the room and ran lightly upstairs to the suite she was to occupy for the night, found the design and her keys, and then hurried back to the library.

Both her friends were now as anxious as herself to solve the mystery.

"Eleven—nine—four," said Mr. Silsby, musingly, as he observed the figures at the bottom of the design. "How many panels are there on the various sides of the room?" he continued, glancing round.

At the end where they were seated there was the fireplace, with three panels on each side of it.

On the east, overlooking the lawn, there was a large bay window and two smaller ones, with panels between.

Opposite the fireplace were wide sliding doors, with draperies, and two panels on each side of them; but on the west side Mr. Silsby counted twenty-one panels, although they were mostly concealed by the bookcases that stood against the wall.

Ruth also observed this.

"Twenty-one," she remarked, after rapidly counting them, "and, Mr. Silsby, that brings the eleventh right in the centre. Do you suppose that is what the number stands for?"

"That was my thought," he returned,

"but it is directly behind that bookcase."

"Can we not move it out?"

"We will try," he said; but he found it was far too heavy for his strength, for it was full of ponderous volumes.

"It is no use—I cannot stir it; the books will have to come out," he continued. "Lock the doors and draw the draperies, so that no one will know what is going on here, for if there are any secrets to be disclosed, they belong to you alone."

Mrs. Silsby and Ruth hastened to obey him, and then they all began the work of removing the books from the shelves.

This took some time, for the case was a large one, but when it was emptied Mr. Silsby easily moved it away from the wall, when they all gathered in front of the centre panel.

Ruth's eyes instantly sought the star; but her face fell when she saw that there was no slot in it, as represented in the design that she held in her hands.

"I am afraid that we have had all our labour for nothing," she remarked, in a disappointed tone. "I was almost sure we should find that this key"—holding up the one she had found in the hollow cane—"would unlock the panel for us."

Mr. Silsby said nothing, but examined the star closely for a moment.

Then, taking a knife from his pocket, he carefully scraped down the centre of it.

"There is a slot here," he said, at length, "but it has been filled up with plaster of Paris and gilded over."

The two ladies watched him with breathless interest until he removed all that had been inserted in the aperture, when a slot, exactly like that represented in the design, was revealed.

"Give me the key," Mr. Silsby commanded, holding out his hand for it.

Ruth passed it to him, when he inserted it in the slot and turned it to the right, whereupon the panel began to slide noiselessly upward, revealing what looked to be a solid iron wall behind.

"So far so good," said the lawyer, with a smile of satisfaction. "Now, what are the other figures?"

"Nine and four," Ruth replied.

Mr. Silsby carefully examined the whole

surface before him, seeking for corresponding numbers, but without finding what he sought.

He tapped sharply upon the wall with the handle of his knife, but it gave back only a dull thud.

"It seems like a safe," he remarked, "but with no visible way to get inside of it. Nine—four," he repeated, musingly.

He took a small rule from his pocket and measured nine inches upward from the bottom of the panel, then four out from the edge, on the right side, when he attempted to insert his knife at that point. It was no use. The wall was of solid iron.

He then tried the same experiment on the other side, when, lo! the point of his knife went into some yielding substance.

"Aha! we have found the secret at last, Mrs. Plympton!" he exclaimed, in a tone of triumph. "This arrangement is, without a doubt, a safe, and the keyhole has been filled with wax, and the whole surface painted over to conceal the fact."

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT THE ROTHWICK TREASURE-VAULT REVEALED:

Mr. Silsby worked away diligently for a few moments, cutting out the filling, which, indeed, proved to be bees-wax, his companions watching him with breathless interest during the operation.

"Now the key," he said, at last.

The next moment it was fitted into the lock, and, turning this also to the right, a sharp click was heard, and then the massive door swung slowly outward.

The opening of that iron door revealed a very shallow safe or fireproof closet, about eighteen inches high and twelve wide, that had been built into the wall, and so cunningly concealed that no one would suspect its existence.

Inside this, shelves and pigeon-holes had been arranged at equal distances, and these were filled with small bags, boxes, and packages, all disposed in the most orderly manner.

"Why, this is perfectly wonderful! It is more like a fairy tale than a vivid reality! What do you suppose those

boxes and bags contain?" Ruth exclaimed, with dilated eyes, her cheeks aflame with excitement.

"Well, it strikes me that it is but a fitting accompaniment to the many other remarkable incidents of your romantic life," Mr. Silsby observed, with a smile.

"Just think of the years and years that they have been concealed here!" Ruth went on. "Robert Allenwood Rothwick, my grandfather, was born in 1802. Sir Amos died in 1808, and so, of course, he must have secreted these things some time between those two dates—more than eighty years ago!"

"Well, Mrs. Plympton, suppose you examine your treasures," Mr. Silsby suggested. "I confess to a tantalizing curiosity to know what these numerous packages contain."

Ruth shivered slightly. Somehow she shrank from touching the things, believing, as she did, that Sir Amos Rothwick had put them into their cunningly-contrived vault. It seemed almost like reaching across the great gulf of the past and joining hands with her dead ancestor, for whom—knowing what she did regarding his history—she entertained but very little respect.

"Well," she said, with a nervous laugh, and a shrug of her shoulders, "I suppose I might as well, since some one must solve the mystery;" and, reaching out her hand, she took one of the leather bags from the lower shelf.

Untying the string that bound it, she looked within and uttered a cry of astonishment, for it was full of gold!—bright, yellow, golden guineas!

Another and another were examined until the whole number had been inspected, and with the same result. Each receptacle was found to contain about two hundred pieces, and there were forty in all.

The boxes and packages were taken next, and these were found to contain many valuable jewels, some of them beautifully set, but most of them unset.

There were also some choice heirlooms, in the way of gold plate; and in the very last box of all, they came across a small morocco case that contained the picture

of a beautiful woman, painted on ivory, and framed in gold, set with precious stones.

She was a sweet-faced, stately-looking girl, of about twenty years, with mild blue eyes, an intelligent forehead, and delicate, patrician features.

Turning the miniature over, Ruth found engraved on the back the name "Elizabeth" and the date, "June 8th, 1800."

"No wonder he loved her and wanted her set right before the world," she cried, involuntary tears starting to her eyes; "but, oh, what a pity it is that the letter, which would have explained all these mysteries, vindicated her honour, and smoothed all the rough places out of her life, was lost! What a treasure, vault!" she went on, with a wondering sigh, "and, of course, all its contents were intended for her and her son."

"There cannot be any doubt of that," Mr. Silsby responded; "and those jewels in the old cane were evidently intended, as we have already surmised, to provide her with funds necessary to push her claim against the supposed Lady Rothwick."

"Oh, why did he do such a wicked thing as to conceal his first marriage, and so wrong another woman?" Ruth exclaimed, an expression of distress on her fair face. "It may have been because of some early betrothal which was considered binding, as used to be the custom with the old English families; and then, after that bitter quarrel, he recklessly determined to revenge himself by revealing the truth to humiliate Lady Rothwick. In all probability, he expected that he would be speedily avenged, and his wronged Elizabeth installed in her rightful position at an early day, as she doubtless would have been but for the carelessness of his valet; and thus it has remained for a scion of the fifth generation to vindicate the fair fame of the woman he loved."

"An apparently little thing will sometimes change the whole course of a person's life, as the loss of that letter has proved, for it is patent that everything hinged upon the explanations it contained," Mrs. Silsby here remarked; "and so Sir

Amos's revenge, if such was his object, upon Lady Rothwick, was not accomplished, after all."

"I think it is dreadful to cherish such a spirit of vindictiveness," said Ruth, in a tone of disgust, "and I will never lend my sanction to any such sentiment. I do not like the Rothwick motto, and I am going to modify it. I believe," she continued, thoughtfully, "that it is right that I, as the lineal descendant of the true heir, should come into this inheritance at this time; but I have not contested the matter because of any feeling of malice, to perpetuate the sentiment of that legend; and now I am going to establish a reign of harmony and goodwill towards all men; I am going to surmount that revengeful thistle with a dove, which, being interpreted, will mean that the brooding presence of peace and love conquers all wrongs."

"What a lovely conception!" exclaimed Mrs. Silsby, admiringly; "and with those emblems of a divine charity both above and below the Rothwick thistle, and such a spirit to perpetuate the sentiment, I am sure that your successors will be a far nobler race than your ancestors."

"But what shall I do with all the treasures, Mr. Silsby?" Ruth questioned, after a moment of thought, while a look of anxiety settled over her face. "I feel as if another elephant had been thrust upon me."

"I think it would be well for us to take them all away with us and deposit them with some bank or trust company in London until you decide as to their final disposition," her friend returned. "It is certainly foolish to allow these treasures—especially the gold—to remain longer here, losing interest and requiring such an effort to get at them in case they should be wanted."

Ruth thought this good advice; consequently everything was removed to their travelling-bags, after which the book-case was replaced and the books restored to their proper places, when, wearied with their labours and the excitement of their discoveries, the three friends retired to rest.

They remained at the castle for a couple

of days longer, during which they had several delightful drives about the surrounding country, and obtained some idea of the extent of the great estate.

Then they returned to London, where Ruth settled quietly down for the remainder of the winter, while Mr. and Mrs. Silsby proceeded to Italy, where they intended to spend about three months in travel and sightseeing. It was their intention to return to Ruth about the 1st of May, to remain during the London season, after which they were all to take a trip through Scotland, and, later, through Switzerland.

Ruth was somewhat lonely during the absence of her friends, although her solicitors, Messrs. Temple and Henderson, exerted themselves to entertain her.

She received a great deal of attention, her beauty and large wealth proving strong attractions.

* * * * *

July came, and found the little party pleasantly located in Switzerland, at an hotel at Interlaken, from which point they intended to make various trips to places of interest among the Alps.

It was only a day or two after their arrival at this favourite resort that Ruth became conscious that she had an invalid for a neighbour; for, in the suite of rooms adjoining hers, she could hear, at all hours of the day and night, violent coughing, like some one in the last stages of consumption.

"I wonder who it can be! The poor man must be a great sufferer," she remarked to Mr. Silsby, as, on the second day, they passed the nurse in the hall, on his way upstairs with a bowl of nourishment in his hands.

"Mr. Hartmann, I believe, is the gentleman's name," her friend replied.

Ruth stopped short and turned upon him a startled glance.

"Hartmann!" she repeated, all the colour fading out of her face. "Mr. Silsby! I believe he must be—Ralph!"

The lawyer looked astonished. The thought had not occurred to him before.

"What has put such an idea into your head?" he questioned; yet something

seemed to tell him that her intuitions were correct.

"Because—oh, because he coughed just like that the last time I saw him; I thought there was something familiar in the sound," Ruth timidly returned, and he could see that she was quivering in every limb from nervous excitement. "Will you please find out the truth for me?" she added. "I must know at once."

Mr. Silsby went directly to the proprietor of the hotel to ascertain what he could regarding the invalid.

Presently he returned, looking both grave and troubled.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Plympton, that your suspicions are correct," he remarked. "I find that there is a Mr. Ralph Hartmann registered here—that he is a gentleman who is badly disfigured from small-pox, and is now failing rapidly with consumption. It is thought that he cannot live many days."

Ruth waited to hear no more.

She went immediately to her room, looking, as she felt, completely unnerved by this unexpected incident, and there she remained the whole day, fighting a terrible battle with herself.

What was her duty in view of this unlooked-for situation? Was it simply chance that had again thrown her into such proximity with Ralph in this supreme hour, or had it been so ordered for some special purpose? If so, how should she meet it?

These were some of the questions that arose to torture her.

Ralph Plympton was still her husband—the father of her child. He was alone in a strange land, sick—dying!

Must he die without one kind word; without a single friend to lean upon; without one farewell look upon the child that was so near him, and for whom she knew he must yearn beyond expression?

Ah! it was a day that she did not soon forget; but always afterwards she was glad that she acted as she did.

When evening came she appeared on the verandah, in search of her friends, looking somewhat pale and weary, but with a calm, steadfast light in her lovely eyes,

Approaching Mr. Silsby, she put a sealed envelope in his hands.

"Will you kindly give this to the proprietor, to be sent up to him?" she inquired, with visible emotion.

"Suppose you let me take it up for you, Mrs. Plympton," said her friend, kindly. "I have been waiting to see you, to learn your wishes, before paying him a visit on my own account; for I feel sure that Mr. Plympton will be glad to see an old friend, and there may be some service that I can render him. Besides, I can break the fact of your presence here without giving him the shock which, perhaps, the surprise of a communication direct from you might do."

"You are right. It will be much better for you to see him first," Ruth replied; and then Mr. Silsby went immediately about his errand.

He found, as he had surmised, that Mr. Hartmann was none other than Ralph Plympton, while it was but too evident that he had a very short time to live.

He was weakened to a mere skeleton, and so weak that he could not lift his head from his pillow. But he expressed an almost childish joy when Mr. Silsby went into his presence.

"Ah, it is so comforting to see a home face!" he breathed, as he clung feebly to the hand of the lawyer. "Can you tell me anything about—her and the little one?"

"Yes," replied his companion, a choking sensation in his throat, "they are both well, and I have come to you now because she sent me to you."

"She—Ruth sent you?" Ralph wonderingly repeated, his pale face flushing with excitement and a thrill of joy.

"Even so, my friend, and I have a letter for you from her."

"Oh, let me have it!" pleaded the dying man, reaching out a trembling hand for the precious missive. Then, with an eager look, he questioned, breathlessly, "Where is she?"

"Mrs. Plympton is here, in this house," Mr. Silsby responded. "She learned only to-day that an invalid by the name of Hartmann was a guest in the house, and she immediately suspected the truth.

Now read your letter, and you will learn her wishes."

The sick man tore open and devoured it with his hungry eyes. It read:

Ralph,—I hear that you are in the house, and very ill, and there is a feeling of uneasiness in my heart—a fear that you are not prepared for such an emergency. You were so self-sacrificing for us, I am afraid you may lack for comforts and luxuries that you should have at this time. Tell me truly if such is the case. And perhaps it might be a comfort to you to see Hope; if so, you have but to signify the wish.

Tears rolled fast over the thin, scarred face of the sufferer as he read the note.

"She is very good—very considerate," he murmured, as he refolded the faintly perfumed sheet and held it clasped in both hands. "Yes, I should like to see my child, but, oh, if I could see her also, just once more!" he concluded, with a yearning sigh.

Mr. Silsby was on the verge of tears himself, in view of that despairing look, for it told him how exceedingly forlorn, how utterly barren the man's life had been.

"Shall I tell Mrs. Plympton that you would like to see her?" he inquired.

"Oh, do you think she would come?" cried the invalid, eagerly.

"I am very sure she would gladly do anything to contribute to your comfort. Shall I ask her to come to you to-morrow?" the lawyer asked, as he arose to go.

"No—to-night—now!" panted Ralph, and then was convulsed with a violent fit of coughing, which his companion feared might extinguish the spark of life that burned so feebly within him.

CHAPTER XXI.

RALPH PLYMPTON PASSES AWAY.

Mr. Silsby went directly out, leaving Ralph in the care of his nurse, who came to him as soon as he heard him coughing.

He sought Ruth, who was anxiously awaiting his coming on the veranda.

He told her of his interview with Ralph, and concluded by remarking:

"I do not believe he can live many hours; he is very frail, and sadly

changed. He expressed a wish that he might see both you and Hope to-night. Did I do right to tell him I thought you would be willing to go to him?"

"Perfectly; I will go to him at once," Ruth quietly replied.

She went immediately to her room, where she found Mary about to undress Hope.

"Do not put Hope to bed just yet, Mary. I want her for a few minutes," she said; and, taking the child in her arms, she went into her own chamber and shut the door.

"Darling," she said, in a tone that was far from steady, "there is a sick gentleman here who wants to see you. Mamma is going to take you to him; but his face is all marked where it has been sore, and you must not say anything about it. Will Hope remember?"

"Yes," said the child, nodding gravely, and being an unusually thoughtful child for her years, Ruth felt that she could trust her.

She sent Mary with a line to Mr. Silsby, asking him to call for Hope at Ralph's door in about fifteen minutes; then, after making some slight changes in the child's attire, she went straight to her husband's rooms.

The nurse ushered her at once into the sick man's presence, and, for a moment, Ruth's heart almost failed her as her eyes fell upon the wasted figure that lay on the bed, and the thin, sunken, and still unsightly face that turned eagerly towards her as she entered.

Could it be possible that this had ever been the gay, dashing, handsome Ralph Plympton who had so won her girl's fancy during those old days at Hazelwood Heights?

"This is very good of you," he panted, weakly, as the nurse went out, leaving them alone. "I thank you more than I can express."

Then his glance wandered to Hope, who was gazing at him with a grave, wondering look in her eyes, and a faint smile of pleasure lighted up his wan face.

Ruth led the child close to his couch.

"Hop, shake hands with the gentleman," she gently commanded; and th-

little one unhesitatingly laid her dimpled, perfect hand upon his outstretched palm.

His fingers closed over it with an eager, tender clasp, his lips quivering with emotion.

"Poor man!" lisped Hope, in her sweet childish tones. "Have you got any little girls?"

"No, dear, I am all-alone," Ralph faltered, a sharper pang than usual assailing him as he uttered that last significant word.

"Like mamma and me," the innocent child returned. "My papa has gone away; but I've got his picture," she added, with an air of triumph, as if that was a treasured possession.

Ralph started and glanced quickly at Ruth.

"Then she knows who"—he began, and then stopped.

"Certainly," Ruth answered; "she has the photograph that was taken in Paris. I did not think it right to withhold such knowledge from her."

"Thank you; you were always considerate, Ruth," he returned, huskily.

Then he batted a few moments longer with Hope, his eyes lingering upon her dainty form and sweet face with infinite tenderness.

She did not appear to shrink from him at all, a circumstance for which Ruth was very thankful, and said several quaint, pretty things that gave him some knowledge of her precocity and enlightened him regarding the training she was receiving from her mother.

Finally there came a tap upon the door, and Ruth knew that Mr. Silsby had come to take the child back to her room.

"I am going to send her away now, while I talk a little longer with you," she said to Ralph, by way of explanation. Then turning to Hope, she added, "Say good night to the gentleman, dearie; Mr. Silsby has come for you, and Mary is waiting to put you to bed."

Ralph lifted the tiny hand that he still held and laid it against his hot lips, kissing it softly twice.

Hope looked at it gravely a moment after he released it, then, waving it at

him with a pretty gesture of farewell, said, sweetly:

"Good night. I sorry you are sick."

And then the little one went out for ever from the presence of her father, whose keener pang was the realization of the fact that she was ignorant of their relationship, and that he was entitled to no recognition from her.

Ruth, after giving her into Mr. Silsby's hands, returned to him, and was smitten to the soul by the expression of suffering on his face.

"Now, Ralph," she said, as she sat down beside him, "is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Thank you—nothing; it is more than I deserve that you should be willing to let me look into your face once more," he said, humbly. "I am going fast; I shall soon be done with earth, and—I am glad. I did not think, when I left you that night, that I should ever see you again; but this unexpected meeting is like a little glimpse of heaven this side the grave. It gives me an opportunity to tell you something that has long been in my heart—that my one wish for your future is that you may be happy. You understand me, Ruth?"

She was silent. Yes, she understood him, but her heart was far too full to admit of her speaking, while her quivering lips and the pitiful look in her eyes told him that there was no bitterness in her soul towards him.

"There is one other thing I would like to speak of"—

"Pray, tell me what it is. Do not fear to speak freely," she said, as he hesitated; "any wish of yours shall be sacredly attended to."

"Thank you. I do long to be laid to rest in my own country; and, since Mr. Silsby is here"—

"I understand," Ruth hastily interposed; "do not talk of it, Ralph—the wish is sufficient."

He lifted a grateful glance to her.

"I did not expect this," he said; "I had no thought that friends would be near me at this time; but the fact has made me very restful and content. I had authorized my servant to send a package

to Mr. Silsby for you, and a letter which it contains would have explained everything. It will be found in my trunk, and that is all that I am going to say to you about it. I want to speak of yourself, Ruth," he added, a slight smile relaxing his lips. "It seems that you have become a great lady."

"Ah, so you know!" she exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes, I have read all the papers, and have learned that you have won a vast inheritance," he replied. "It has read like a thrilling romance, and I am very glad; I know you will make a noble use of your wealth. Of course, my income will soon revert to Hope; you will find that the matter has been attended to when you open the package I spoke of. I hope the dear child will be like her mother when she grows to womanhood; I can wish nothing better for her. You will never tell her, Ruth"—he interposed, with an appealing look that almost made her weep.

"No, Ralph, she shall never learn anything of an unpleasant nature," Ruth kindly returned. Then, seeing that he was panting from weariness, she arose, adding, "I must not remain any longer now, for you are very weary; but I will bring Hope to see you again to-morrow, if you wish."

"Thank you," he breathed faintly, but his eyes were fastened upon her face with a look that haunted her for months with its intense yearning, its devouring heart-hunger.

"Good night," she said, gently, then went softly out; and with a look of tearful agony in his eyes, he turned his face to the wall, murmuring:

"Good-bye, love; I am ready to go now."

An hour later Ralph Plympton's soul had passed from earth.

He died so quietly that his nurse did not know when the end came—he thought him asleep; but when he went to him to give him his nourishment as usual, he found him dead, with a dainty, faintly-perfumed handkerchief clasped in his hands and pressed to his lips.

It had fluttered from Ruth's belt and

fallen upon his couch as she turned to leave him.

Mr. Silsby at once claimed the privilege of an old friend, and attended to everything that was necessary to be done for him.

He had the body embalmed, and then temporarily entombed to await being conveyed to America, where, later, it was laid in the Plympton vault, beside the ill-fated young man's father and mother.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

Two months afterwards our friends were back in London, where they were joined by Basil Meredith.

About a month after Ralph Plympton's death, Ruth wrote to Basil of the fact, and also gave him a history of all that had occurred in connection with herself since she last saw him.

His only reply was a cable message of five words—"May I come to you?"

And her answer flashed back with inspiring cordiality—"Yes, come."

There was no restraint in their meeting, for each knew the heart of the other; and when Basil held out his arms to her, the one endearing term "Sweetheart" escaping his lips, Ruth went straight to him, was folded close to his breast, and both knew that they were reunited for all time.

Two months later they were quietly married, with only a few friends to witness the ceremony.

Then there was an enjoyable trip to Paris for the Grand Opera season, and to enable the ladies to do some necessary shopping, which they had long been anticipating.

After that the Silsbys began to talk of going home.

And now came the time to decide a question which Ruth had long been dreading. Where was to be her home for the future?

She did not wish to reside permanently in England, and yet her large interests seemed to point to a duty there.

"I really do not know *what* to do," she remarked to her husband one day, while discussing the subject. "I know what I

would *like* to do, however," she added, smiling and flushing.

"Well, sweetheart, what you 'would like' to do will be my aim to accomplish, if such a result is possible," Basil returned, as he fondly drew her head down upon his shoulder. "Now, what is it, my dear?"

"I would like to turn Rothwick Castle into a great asylum for homeless boys," Ruth returned, with unusual gravity.

"Really, Ruth?" he inquired, as gravely, while he searched her face earnestly.

"Really, Basil," she said. "I know I should be terribly homesick to live in that immense place all by ourselves; there is nothing homelike about it, and our small family would be lost in such a labyrinth of halls, rooms, and passages; but it would make a splendid institution for the purpose I have named. The only drawback is the want of a suitable fund to carry it on properly. I wonder"—

"Well, dear, go on," said Basil, smiling encouragement.

"Suppose I should give Rothwick Castle for such a purpose, do you imagine the Government would endow it or devote a certain sum annually towards the support of it?" Ruth thoughtfully inquired.

Basil laughed out merrily.

"Sweetheart, you are developing rapidly," he said, with playful fondness; "but I am somewhat amused, when I think of all the trouble you have taken to secure it, that you should become so suddenly anxious to get rid of your noble inheritance. Don't you expect to be haunted by the ghost of old Sir Amos for your unappreciativeness?"

"I do not imagine he will trouble me very much, especially as I hope to make atonement for some of his sins in thus doing good to others," Ruth smilingly retorted. "But, seriously, Basil, what do you think of my scheme?"

"I think it a very grand one, my darling, and I believe it can be accomplished," he earnestly responded. "I will see what can be done immediately."

He threw himself heartily into the work, and through the influence of some

prominent men to whom he was introduced by Messrs. Temple and Henderson, the matter was brought, at an early day, before the proper authorities, who succeeded in having a generous fund appropriated to the cause, while the Queen sent a personal expression of her approbation to "the generous lady, in view of the philanthropic spirit that had prompted her to devote her noble inheritance to such a grand work."

Of course, even after that, it took a great deal of time to get everything in order; but by the end of a year the institution was complete in every department, and Basil and his wife came over to England again to be present at the formal opening and dedication of the "Rothwick Home for Homeless Boys," where such waifs were also to be liberally educated and fitted for some useful sphere in life.

Hope Cottage was abandoned, in view of the larger enterprise. Will Browning and his brother were transferred to the castle, as were also Mr. and Mrs. Winslow—the former to act as general superintendent of the institution, the latter as chief matron, while Mrs. Barstow, who calls herself an Englishwoman, and therefore only too glad of a comfortable berth in her own country, became a valuable assistant.

It is only necessary to add that the enterprise became a most successful one, reflecting great honour upon its philanthropic projector, Mrs. Basil Meredith, who watched its development with ever-increasing pleasure and interest.

She, with her family, spent a portion of every year at the castle, where a part of one wing had been specially set apart for them, and their advent was always eagerly looked forward to by every individual in the Home.

Their winters were passed in Basil's elegant residence in New York, and the late summer and early autumn at Hazelwood Heights.

In the course of time there came a son and heir, who was christened Rothwick; and afterwards another dear little girl, whom Ruth named Elizabeth Allenwood,

after her mother and her great-grand-mother.

* * * * *

Ruth never saw Inez Plympton again; but she learned, about a year after her marriage, that the woman was a raving maniac and an inmate of a private lunatic asylum in Westchester County, New York.

"I believe she was always more or less insane," she remarked, with a gentle sigh of regret; "for it does not seem possible that any one can be sane and be ruled by such an ungovernable temper as she possessed."

Fortunately for her peace of mind, she never knew what finally occasioned her hopeless lunacy; but the truth of the matter was that Inez one day read in an English paper a notice of the marriage of Basil Meredith and the girl whom she hated with all the intensity of her fiery nature.

Instantly she flew into a towering rage, tore the paper into atoms, and threw them from her as if they were burning brands.

Then something seemed to snap in her brain, and from that hour she never knew one lucid moment.

Five years later she died, and was quietly buried in Greenwood by the lawyer who had the care of her property, and thus ended a life that had been wholly governed by selfishness and passion. It had burnt itself out, and was lost in oblivion.

Will Browning continued to prove himself most worthy of the regard of his kind friends, Mr. and Mrs. Meredith, and their efforts in his behalf.

He was a faithful student, a noble-hearted, high-principled fellow, and gave promise of becoming a good and useful man, while his brother, under his influence, bade fair to follow in his foot-steps.

Our story is told; and now we must take leave of the dear little woman whom we have grown to both love and honour, and who, supremely happy in the care and affection of her noble husband, and surrounded by her beautiful and interesting children, was a living proof of the poet's truism that

Blessings ever wait on virtuous deeds,
And, though a late, a sure reward succeeds.

THE MASKED BRIDAL.

BY MRS. GEORGIE SHELTON,

Author of "Sister Angela," "Dorothy's Jewels," "Grazia's Mistake," "Steala," &c.

Mrs. Georgie Sheldon is well known as a writer of remarkably fascinating stories, full of charming love interest and startling portrayal of character. Her plots are always fresh, and each new story speaks volumes for the ingenuity and fertility of her invention. This is particularly the case with "The Masked Bridal."

Edith Allandale is left an orphan, and is compelled to go out into the world to fight for herself. By a mere chance she is thrown into the company of two wealthy Bostonians, Mr. and Mrs. Goddard, and she becomes the companion of the latter. This lady, who is of an extremely jealous disposition, conceives the idea that her husband is paying court to Edith. To thwart this, and to help her brother, Emil Correlli, who has fallen in love with Edith, she causes to be performed a play, into which is introduced a scene depicting a "masked *bridal." She persuades Edith to take the part of the "masked bride," while Emil Correlli, whom Edith dislikes if not hates, takes that of the "masked bridegroom." The consternation which ensues when the masks are removed may be better imagined than described.

How the tangled skein is unravelled, how the mysteries involving all of the chief characters are finally disclosed, and how Edith is ultimately united to the choice of her heart: all this is told with a *verve* and an impressiveness which Mrs. Sheldon alone seems to possess. The story throbs with excitement from first chapter to last.

"The Masked Bridal" is a notable addition to domestic fiction, and is undoubtedly one of the best novels from the gifted pen of one of the most popular of modern authors.

On Sale at all Newsagents, price 3d.; by Post, 4d.

LONDON: JAMES HENDERSON,
RED LION HOUSE, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

STELLA:

THE STORY OF HER TRIALS AND FORTUNES.

By MRS. GEORGIE SHELDON,

Author of "Sister Angela," "That Dowry of a Girl," "Ruth's Heritage," &c.

This is one of the most absorbing stories that this talented and prolific writer has yet produced. It pulses with human interest, the plot is skilfully contrived, and the situations are intensely dramatic.

The story relates the experiences of Stella Mowbray, an English orphan, residing with American relatives named Marchmont, by whom she is treated as a dependent. On the voyage out she has made the acquaintance of Jacob Roosevelt, an old gentleman, who is the uncle of Mrs. Marchmont.

Roosevelt calls on his niece, but stating that he has lost his fortune, he is coldly received. Stella, however, befriends him, and the story of his misfortune having been a pretence, she becomes his heiress.

Stella is in love with an artist, who turns out to be an English peer, and attempts are made to separate the lovers by Mrs. Marchmont and her daughter Josephine. The schemers are defeated, and Stella weds the man of her heart.

The story is written with much *verve*, and the character of the truthful, self-sacrificing heroine is one of Mrs. Sheldon's most artistic portrayals. The story as a whole is a striking picture of the vicissitudes of human life and experience.

On Sale at all Newsagents, price 3d.; by Post, 4d.

LONDON: JAMES HENDERSON,
RED LION HOUSE, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

The Queen's Champion

A ROYAL ROMANCE OF THE COURT OF FRANCE.

This romance takes us back to the Court of France in the year 1520, and deals with the adventures of Louis de Lemmonnier, a young soldier of fortune.

By a chivalrous act Louis enlists the sympathy, and ultimately the love, of a beautiful young lady, Mademoiselle Adrienne de Bomanville, a favourite of the Queen, and through her is appointed to be "The Queen's Musketeer."

While holding this office, Louis performs many highly dangerous services for the Queen, who at that time has an unpleasant disagreement with her husband, Francis I.; and by his skilful conduct of affairs, requiring discretion and daring for their accomplishment, succeeds not only in reconciling King and Queen, but in making them both his friends, and favour his suit to Mademoiselle de Bomanville.

This story is romantic in the highest degree: every chapter is full of fascination, and at every turn one meets with unexpected incident. By its sustained interest, and by the daring of the adventures described, it recalls to mind Alexander Dumas' famous tale "The Three Musketeers"; but with these admirable features in common, all resemblance ceases, for "The Queen's Champion" is charmingly original and fresh.

Everyone who reads "The Queen's Champion" will be compelled to admit that it is one of the best romances ever written, and one that can be read again and again with no abatement of interest.

On Sale at all Newsagents, price 3d.; by Post, 4d.

LONDON: JAMES HENDERSON,
RED LION HOUSE, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

